THE VICTORY OF LIFE

JINAGIK JEET

Original Maithili novel authored

by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English

by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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An English Translation of the Maithili novel Jinagik-Jeet
Authored by Jagdish Prasad Mandal
Translated into English by Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

The Victory of Life is the English translation of Jinagik Jeet, a Maithili novel by Jagdish Prasad Mandal, translated by Dr. Ram Ashish Singh. Rooted in the rural world of Mithila, the novel portrays life in Kalyanpur through family, labour, agriculture, education, social duty, and moral awakening. At its centre are Bachelal, an honest teacher inwardly troubled by his distance from society; Sumitra, his wise and hardworking mother; Ruma, his wife from a salaried background; and the wider circle of villagers whose joys and sufferings shape the meaning of life.

The novel explores the tension between agrarian values and salaried culture, between comfort and responsibility, and between personal happiness and meaningful existence. Through childbirth, illness, poverty, education, farming, songs, cattle, debt, service, and social cooperation, Mandal reveals how ordinary village life carries profound ethical truth. The Victory of Life is a thoughtful, humane, and deeply rooted novel about compassion, work, family, society, and the search for a life worth living.

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Dedication

To the living soil of Mithila,
and to all ordinary lives whose labour, suffering,
compassion and quiet moral courage keep humanity alive.
This book is dedicated to those who turn pain into
duty, family into service, and life into a
victory of the human spirit.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

Preface

The Victory of Life is the English rendering of Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili novel Jinagik Jeet, a work born from the living soil of Mithila and shaped by deep experience of village life. This novel does not merely tell the story of a few people living in a small rural settlement. It opens before us a whole world of labour, hunger, family, faith, social duty, compassion, education and inner awakening. In its quiet way, it asks one of the oldest and most difficult questions of human life: what makes life truly victorious?

Jagdish Prasad Mandal is one of those writers whose literature cannot be separated from life. His creative world has grown out of close contact with the rural society of Mithila: farmers, workers, poor households, women bearing the burden of family, children struggling for education, elders carrying memory, and ordinary people trying to preserve dignity in difficult conditions. He does not look at society from a safe distance. He writes from within it. His pen moves through fields, courtyards, cattle sheds, village paths, schools, ponds, markets, kitchens, songs, illnesses, debts, births, deaths and small acts of help. In his fiction, these are not decorative details. They are the living substance of society.

Mandalji's strength lies in his ability to discover moral meaning in ordinary life. He knows that a village is not only a place where people live. It is a web of relations, duties, habits, memories, conflicts, hopes and failures. A broken family, a neglected animal, a hungry child, a sick woman, an unpaid debt, a neglected field, an honest teacher, a wise mother and a poor labourer are all part of the same moral field. This is why his writing has a rare closeness to truth.

He writes about the local, but he is not limited by the local. Through Mithila, he reaches the human condition.

At the centre of The Victory of Life stands Kalyanpur, a small, scattered village. Yet Kalyanpur is not a mere background. It is a complete moral universe. Human beings, animals, trees, fields, seasons, tools, customs, songs, hunger, hardship, hope and social memory live together there. The opening of the novel itself reveals the breadth of Mandalji's vision. He presents the village without romantic sweetness and without contempt. It is neither a dreamland nor a place of mere misery. It is a living society, wounded but not dead, poor but not without wisdom, neglected but not without inner strength.

The novel begins with the anxiety of Achhelal and Makhni. Their poverty is real, their fear is real, and their helplessness is painfully human. Makhni is in the last stage of pregnancy. Achhelal has no money, no proper support, and no certainty that even the midwife will come. In this simple domestic situation, Mandalji places before us a larger social question. What is society worth if a poor man must face childbirth, hunger, danger and loneliness without help? What is human relationship worth if custom remains but compassion disappears?

It is here that Sumitra enters, and with her the moral centre of the novel becomes clear. Achhelal comes to her in distress, not because she is rich, but because he believes that a sense of fellow feeling still lives in her household. Sumitra understands at once that childbirth is not merely an event in one poor family. It is a responsibility shared by society. She does not think only of the moment of delivery. She thinks of food, warmth, the mother's body, the child's survival, the weakness caused by poverty and the dignity of care. Her help is not charity in the narrow sense. It is the fulfilment of human duty.

Sumitra is one of the finest creations of this novel. She is a mother, a widow, a worker, a singer, a cultivator, a keeper of memory, a guide of the household and a moral thinker. Her knowledge does not come from books, yet it is deep, practical and humane. She knows the value of grain, cattle, soil, health, songs, seasons, tools, labour and relationships. She also knows that a family

cannot remain healthy if its members do not understand their duties, and that society cannot move forward if families become closed and self-centred. Her wisdom grows from work, suffering, observation and love.

Through Sumitra, Mandalji gives us a powerful image of Maithil womanhood. She is not shown as a decorative figure, nor as a weak sufferer. She is disciplined, alert, compassionate and inwardly strong. She preserves the culture of the home, but she is not bound by lifeless tradition. She understands change, but she does not accept the kind of change that cuts human beings away from labour, duty and social warmth. In her speech, the wisdom of generations finds a living voice. In her hands, the home becomes a place of service, correction, nourishment and moral renewal.

Bachelal, around whom the main movement of the novel takes shape, is an honest teacher. He is regular in his work, sincere in his conduct and respectable in the ordinary sense of the word. Yet he suffers from a deep inner lack. He has a salary, a position, a family and a fixed routine, but he does not have a living bond with society. He teaches children at school, returns home, reads a little, eats, sleeps and repeats the same cycle. Outwardly, nothing seems wrong. Inwardly, he feels that something essential has been missed.

This feeling becomes sharper when he remembers his father. His father was not highly educated. He was a simple farmer, yet he had earned affection, honour and trust in the village. People came to him, addressed him with respect and accepted him as one of their own. Bachelal begins to ask himself why he, despite his education and honesty, remains socially cut off. This question is one of the central concerns of the novel. Mandalji shows that education, if confined to a job, a salary and personal advancement, cannot make life complete. Knowledge must create relationships. It must deepen service. It must bring a person nearer to society, not farther away from it.

Sumitra helps Bachelal understand this truth. She explains to him that individual life, family life and social life are not separate blocks. They are joined like the wheels and compartments of a train. If one part stops moving, the whole movement is weakened. A person who thinks only of himself cannot build a family. A family that thinks

only of its own comfort cannot build society. A society in which families lose fellow feeling becomes hollow. These ideas are not presented in the language of theory. They arise through the language of home, field, food, cattle, illness, work and everyday experience. This is the special force of Mandalji's art.

The conflict between agrarian culture and salaried culture enters the novel most visibly through Ruma. She comes from a salaried background and finds the ways of Bachelal's household difficult to accept. The village appears to her to be rough, backward and uncomfortable. The food, the work, the cattle, the household habits, and the constant presence of need and duty all seem strange and burdensome to her. Yet Mandalji does not make her a flat or hateful character. She too has been shaped by her surroundings. Her dissatisfaction is not merely personal. It reflects a wider change in society.

Through Ruma, the novel examines the growing desire for comfort without labour, status without service, and education without social belonging. She represents a new mental world in which cash income is often valued more than self-reliance, and personal ease more than shared duty. Against this stands Sumitra's world, where food is grown, animals are cared for, waste is avoided, labour is honoured, and the household is linked with the village. Bachelal stands between these two worlds. His pain is therefore not simply the pain of a husband or a son. It is the pain of a man placed between two civilisations.

The greatness of the novel lies in the fact that it does not settle this conflict through anger. It allows life to teach. A yam taken from the garden, a sick cow, a child brought for an oil massage, a household quarrel, a poor neighbour's need, a family's expenses, the condition of cattle and the use of time all become occasions for reflection. Mandalji's method is patient. He does not force meaning upon events. He lets meaning arise from them. The reader begins to see that the smallest act within a home may contain a question about civilisation.

The story of Devan widens the horizon of the novel. Through him, Mandalji takes us beyond the inner life of one household and places before us the harsher face of society. Devan is a man formed

by hunger, loss, labour, wandering and endurance. As a child, he loses his parents to illness and want. Society fails him when he needs it most. Yet he does not become merely bitter. He moves through suffering and gathers an inner strength from it. His life raises a difficult question: what kind of society allows a child to stand alone before hunger, death and abandonment?

Devan's journey gives The Victory of Life a larger human depth. He carries within him the memory of grief, but also the dignity of labour. He knows that life cannot be built on dependence alone. He learns to stand, to work, to move and to search. Through Devan, Mandalji shows that suffering may destroy a weak life, but it may also open a deeper vision. Devan is not introduced merely to add incident to the plot. He brings into the novel the voice of those whom society often leaves behind: the hungry, the homeless, the orphaned, the labouring and the wounded.

Education is another important current in the novel. Shivkumar and Ramnath represent the younger generation. Their discipline, study, friendship and success show that education still holds hope. But Mandalji is careful to define the meaning of education. It is not a ladder for selfish advancement. It is a light to be shared. The scene in which the boys look for the newspaper containing the examination result is simple and moving, yet it reveals much about society, honesty, trade, expectation and collective joy. Their success belongs not only to one family. It belongs to the moral climate that has helped them grow.

For Sumitra, education is a shared lamp. Children who come to study at Bachelal's house must also be fed, encouraged and protected. A teacher's duty does not end with classroom teaching. Knowledge must pass into conduct. A child who studies well must become a responsible human being. A degree without character is incomplete. Success without service is hollow. In this sense, The Victory of Life offers a serious educational vision. It asks not how much a child can earn, but what kind of person the child will become.

Thus, by the middle movement of the novel, Bachelal's inward disturbance begins to take the form of understanding. He starts to see that life cannot be measured by salary, routine and private comfort. Nor can a home be held together by habit alone. Society requires

participation. Family requires shared labour. Education requires character. Agriculture requires respect. Women's knowledge requires recognition. The poor require help, not pity. These realisations do not come suddenly. They grow slowly, like a seed beneath the soil. That slow growth is the true movement of the novel.

The later movement of the novel carries Bachelal from thought to action. His awakening does not remain inside the mind. It begins to change his way of living. He understands that time saved must be used well, that money must not lie idle while poor neighbours fall into debt, that land must not become an instrument of exploitation, and that education must return to society in the form of service. Gradually, he moves towards a larger decision. His life as a salaried teacher has given him respect, but it has not given him fulfilment. He now begins to feel that the village itself is calling him.

His decision to leave service is not an escape from duty. It is, in fact, a deeper acceptance of duty. Bachelal wishes to work with land, cattle, children, neighbours and village resources. He sees that agriculture is not backwardness. It is the foundation of food, self-respect, health and social balance. He also sees that a village cannot be rebuilt by speeches alone. Wells, ponds, fields, seeds, animals, tools, time, money and human trust must all be organised with care. Mandalji's vision of change is therefore practical and patient. He does not dream of sudden miracles. He believes in work that begins at home, passes through the family, and then spreads into society.

This is one of the most valuable aspects of The Victory of Life. The novel does not divide moral life from material life. Food, farming, household management, education, health, debt and social respect are all connected. A sick animal is not only an economic loss. It is a sign that care has weakened. A poor man's need is not only his private problem. It is a test of the village. A child's education is not only a family's pride. It is a future responsibility. A woman's labour is not only domestic work. It is the hidden foundation of culture. By joining these small truths together, Mandalji builds a large vision of life.

The women of the novel give this vision its emotional depth. Makhni bears poverty, fear and motherhood with quiet strength. Bhukhni brings tenderness and hope. Ruma represents unease,

transition and the pressure of a changing world. Sumitra, however, remains the central light. She does not speak the language of modern theory, yet she understands society with rare clarity. She knows how grain must be stored, how a mother must be cared for after childbirth, how a child must be fed, how an animal must be tended, how a family must move together, and how pride must be softened by responsibility. In her, the wisdom of labour becomes philosophy.

Mandalji's treatment of folk culture is equally significant. Songs, rituals, seasonal memories, household customs and village speech are not inserted merely to create colour. They are part of the inner life of the people. When Sumitra sings while massaging a child, or remembers Shama songs, sohar, samdaun and barahmasa, the reader hears more than music. One hears the continuity of a civilisation. These songs hold affection, fear, blessing, memory and community. They show that culture is not preserved in books alone. It lives in the voices of women, in courtyards, in festivals, in work and in shared feeling.

The title The Victory of Life must be read in this light. The victory spoken of here is not victory over another person. It is not wealth, status, power or outward success. It is the victory of compassion over indifference, work over idleness, service over selfishness, understanding over confusion, and meaningful existence over narrow comfort. Life becomes victorious when a person learns to live beyond himself. It becomes victorious when a family learns to share labour and care. It becomes victorious when education creates character. It becomes victorious when society protects the weak and honours the dignity of ordinary people.

The novel also reminds us that happiness alone is not enough. A life may contain comfort and still remain empty. A person may be educated and still remain incomplete. A family may have income and still lack warmth. A society may have customs and still lose compassion. Mandalji therefore takes us deeper than the surface of living. He asks us to examine the quality of our relationships, the purpose of our knowledge, the use of our time and the direction of our labour. This is why the novel is not merely rural in its importance. Its questions belong to every society.

For readers outside Mithila, The Victory of Life opens a world

that may at first appear local, but its meaning is widely human. Kalyanpur is a village of Mithila, yet its struggles are familiar everywhere. Every society knows the tension between tradition and change. Every family knows the strain between comfort and responsibility. Every age must decide whether education will serve human life or merely feed ambition. Every human being must ask whether life is to be spent only in earning and consuming, or whether it must be shaped into service, dignity and fellow feeling.

The Maithili original, Jinagik Jeet, is full of rural rhythm, spoken warmth, folk memory and moral seriousness. Its strength lies in its closeness to life. In translating it into English, my effort has been to keep the meaning clear, the language natural and the emotional force alive. I have tried not to burden the English reader with difficulty, but I have also tried not to wash away the fragrance of Mithila. Certain images, customs, relationships and tones belong closely to the world of the original. They have been carried with care so that the English version may remain readable while still breathing the air of its source.

Translation, in such a case, is not a matter of replacing one word with another. It is an act of listening. One must listen to the soil from which the words rise, to the pauses in the speech of the characters, to the sorrow of the poor, to the firmness of a mother, to the unrest of an honest man and to the moral music that moves through the narrative. I have approached this work with humility, knowing that no translation can fully contain the life of the original. Yet I hope that this English rendering will carry its warmth, seriousness and human value to a wider circle of readers.

Jagdish Prasad Mandal's achievement in this novel is remarkable. He takes the ordinary materials of rural life and reveals their deep meaning. He shows that a village is not a backward space to be forgotten, but a living field where human values are tested every day. He gives literary dignity to labour, motherhood, farming, teaching, neighbourly help and social responsibility. He does not shout, yet his voice reaches far. He does not decorate suffering, yet he discovers strength within it. He does not offer easy hope, yet he shows how hope may be built through action.

The Victory of Life should therefore be read not only as a story

of Bachelal, Sumitra, Ruma, Devan, Shivkumar, Ramnath and Kalyanpur, but also as a meditation on the meaning of human life. It tells us that life is not victorious when suffering ends, for suffering never fully leaves the world. Life is victorious when human beings learn to face suffering with compassion, discipline, courage and service. It is victorious when the individual finds the family, the family finds society, and society remembers the human being.

I offer this translation to readers with respect and trust. May those who enter this novel find in it the fragrance of Mithila, the pain of ordinary life, the strength of labour, the tenderness of family and the quiet light of moral awakening. May they see that the true victory of life is not found in escape from the world, but in deeper participation in it. That is the enduring message of Jinagik Jeet. That is the spirit I have tried to carry into The Victory of Life.

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Kalyanpur was a small, scattered village. At the very sight of it, one felt as though human beings from the most ancient times down to the present had lived there in simple contentment. And not only human beings, but beasts and birds as well. The cattle were of every kind, from cows that gave scarcely a trickle of milk to those that yielded as much as twenty litres. The goats were much the same. Some, even after bearing three or four kids at a time, lost one or two for want of milk, while others gave as much as four litres. The trees too showed the same variety. Some groves were filled entirely with one kind of tree, while others were made up wholly of another. The mango orchards were no different. Some consisted entirely of one variety, others wholly of another. Nor was that all. Even now there were great trees that covered as much as two kathas of land, while there were also orchards in which as many as fifteen mango trees spread across a single katha and fruited in abundance.

Forty years earlier, Kalyanpur had not been like the villages of today. There had not been a single hand pump or borewell. Even now, the fields of Kalyanpur were ploughed with the same kind of plough with which King Janak, in the Treta age, was said to have tilled the earth. There had been neither the present abundance in the fields and gardens nor any proper treatment for serious illness. For travel, people had only their own two feet or a wooden wheeled cart drawn by a pair of bullocks.

British rule had ended, yet not the slightest trace of improvement had come to village life. Just as a grinding mill has two stones, the lower fixed and the upper turning, so it was with urban and rural life. Urban life had moved ahead, but rural life remained

fixed like the lower millstone. Embankments and roads, houses and courtyards, all remained as they had been forty years before. Did that mean the people of Kalyanpur had played no part in overthrowing British rule? Certainly not. They had taken part with open-hearted courage. The white soldiers had set the entire village ablaze three times. Some people had been struck with rifle butts, others kicked with heavy leather boots. Prison had become an almost common fate. Many, out of fear, fled the village and never returned. Many families were scattered, and to this day no one knows what became of them.

One such family in Kalyanpur was that of Achhelal. On the third night after the full moon of Aghan, Achhelal and his wife sat at midnight, warming themselves by a roaring fire. Earlier that evening, Makhni had begun to feel pain in her belly. As she was in the final month of pregnancy, she took it to be labour pain, and Achhelal thought the same. Makhni lay on a small mat in the verandah, while Achhelal sat beside her. When the pain subsided, she said, "The pain is easing now."

Resting his hand against his mouth, Achhelal thought to himself, I am all alone. How will I fetch the midwife? How will I keep the fire going properly? It is winter. For a woman in childbirth, cold is as dangerous as death is to a goat.

As soon as the pain eased, Makhni rose briskly and began preparing the meal. She had just lifted the water jar and was about to step out to fetch water when her husband caught her by the arm and stopped her.

"You must not move about so much. I will fetch the water. You take out the pots and pans. I will wash them and bring them back."

Makhni began lighting the hearth, while Achhelal busied himself with various tasks. After washing the utensils, he too sat down near the hearth, warming himself, and began chatting with a smile.

"This time, God will give us a son."

At the mention of a son, Makhni felt herself drift into an ocean of happiness. Savoring the joy within, she began to dream. She would feed the child milk, rub him with oil and turmeric paste, line his eyes with kohl, make him resemble little Lord Krishna, and cover him with kisses. She would carry him in her lap from one courtyard to another,

and one day, have his name entered in the school.

But the moment the thought of school crossed her mind, her feeling changed abruptly, like the sharp tang of fragrant rice and khesari lentils touched with lemon that makes the tongue recoil. The joy in her heart shrank inward. Noticing her face grow dull, Achhelal said, “A poor man’s longing is like a rain bubble. It takes on a lovely shape and colour, but bursts the very moment it begins to swell.”

Another thought arose in Makhni’s mind: wealth came in many forms–fields and land, cows and buffaloes, money and coin–yet greater than all of these was the wealth of a son, who would become his parents’ support in old age and serve them. More than that, he would carry the family line forward. And if the son proved to be an earner, then even in their lifetime, the parents would taste a happiness no less than heaven.

The meal was prepared, and the two of them ate. A small mat had been spread over a thick layer of straw, and upon it Makhni lay down to rest. Achhelal, after clearing away the plates and the lota and finishing the work at the hearth, sat down by the oven to warm himself. He placed tobacco and lime in his mouth. Sitting there, he too began to grow drowsy. To shake off sleep, he rose and paced the courtyard. Once the heaviness lifted, he returned to the fire and sat warming himself again.

Makhni fell asleep. Listening to her breathing, Achhelal thought that if labour pains returned in the middle of the night, he would be in serious difficulty. He knew nothing of such matters. He had not even been able to offer the midwife the customary token, so there was no certainty she would come.

Noticing the fire in the hearth dying down, Achhelal went to the edge of the yard to fetch fuel. The firewood was damp with dew. Drops of moisture fell steadily from the vines and trees. As it was only the third night of the waning moon, the moon would remain in the sky all night.

The thought came to him, and Achhelal looked up. The moon was indeed shining, yet because of the heavy dew, its light did not reach the ground. Carrying an armful of fuel, he returned to the courtyard. Since the hearth stood in the verandah, he thought it better to light the fire indoors so that the house might also grow warm.

At the sound of his footsteps, Makhni woke. Seeing the glowing fire, she too felt the urge to warm herself. Rising from her bedding, she came and sat beside it. The fire burned brightly between them, and they sat on either side. As Makhni suffered in body, so Achhelal suffered in mind. In a tone of helplessness, he said, "Half the night has passed, and half still remains. Yet just as one half has gone, the rest too will somehow pass."

Hearing this, Makhni asked, "Are you still awake?"

"Yes. What else could I do? If I had fallen asleep and you had been seized by pain, I would have been in utter confusion. The whole village is asleep. Whom could I call? It is only a matter of one night. Somehow, we will get through it. I had thought of bringing my sister home, but she too is heavy with child, and she has four or five little ones besides. If I brought her here, the burden of feeding five more mouths would fall upon us. There is nothing in the house as it is. Whatever I earn, we eat."

"You are right," said Makhni. "In one's own home, people may somehow endure hunger and hardship. But someone brought in with honour cannot be left hungry. Day and night, this worry gnaws at me: how will we ever get through this? Still, never mind. There is a measure of rice in the storage jar. Somehow it will last five or seven days. After that, we shall see."

At the mention of that small store of rice, hope stirred in Achhelal's heart. A faint smile touched his lips as he said, "If a child truly meant for us is born, it will live, however much suffering there may be. Otherwise, if it has come only to settle some debt from a previous birth, it will take what is due and depart."

At her husband's words, Makhni remembered their two earlier children. Silently, she thought: had they received proper care, they too might have lived. But what can a human being do when even God seems to have turned away? Pushing these thoughts aside, she said, "There are also people in society who, in times of distress and helplessness, stand before one like God Himself."

"Society is of two kinds," Achhelal replied. "One kind believes helping others is a sacred duty; the other works only against everyone else. You can see it in our own village. Our hamlet has thirty or thirty-five households, with people from four or five different castes. One

caste keeps apart from another, like buffaloes keeping to their own edge. We have three agnatic households among our own kin. All three have enough for a little grain and a few coins. Yet you can see how they remain entangled in quarrels and disputes. That is why they are the most isolated in the whole hamlet. Because of them, others keep a distance from us as well. There is no coming and going, no sharing of food or drink, no exchange of any kind. It is only by God's grace that I find daily labour and we manage to eat in peace. Otherwise, we could not have remained in this village even for a single day."

Hearing this, Makhni nodded. "What you say is true. But the same God who gives sorrow also shows the way through it."

Achhelal said, "When I look across the whole village, it seems to me that only Bachelal's family still has some fellow feeling left. Ten or twenty days a year, I help with their fields and with small household tasks. I do not take loans from them, nor do I owe them anything. Yet something within me says that if I speak to Bachelal's mother, that poor woman will surely help us. Let the night pass somehow. As soon as morning comes, I will go and speak to her. A night of sorrow grows unbearably long. On ordinary nights, dawn comes after a single stretch of sleep, but tonight it refuses to end."

With a weary breath, Makhni said, "My body feels warm now, but my back aches. I am going back to the bedding."

Hearing this, Achhelal rose, took her by the arm, and led her back to her place. As she lay down, she said, "My mind feels lighter now. You should try to sleep as well."

A slight calm entered Achhelal's heart, yet he continued to worry: who could say what this frail body and uncertain hour might bring? Muttering to himself, he stepped outside and looked around. In the thick dimness, nothing could be seen clearly. He lifted his head and gazed at the sky. The smaller stars were barely visible; only the larger ones could be seen. Even the moon appeared faint and blurred. Then he searched for the constellation by which people judged the hour. As he watched, he noticed the western sky growing dim. Taking this as a sign, he felt some relief that the night was nearing its end.

He returned and sat again by the fire. Drowsiness crept back. He placed tobacco and lime in his mouth, stepped outside to spit, then

came back to the embers. Spreading out a sack, he curled himself up, resting his head on his arm, and lay down. Soon he fell asleep, and almost at once he began to dream. In the dream, he saw his wife writhing in labour pain. Startled, he awoke and asked, "Is the pain very bad?"

But Makhni was asleep. There was no reply. Stirring the embers until they glowed brighter, Achhelal bent over her and looked closely at her in the flickering light. A sudden fear seized him that she might have fainted. But her breathing, though uneven, was still there.

At the caw of a crow, Achhelal rose and set out for Bachelal's house. The two houses were not far apart, though the pond between them forced him to take a roundabout path. Achhelal addressed Bachelal's mother as bhouji, elder brother's wife. There was no blood relation between the families, yet socially they were bound by a fraternal tie. Bachelal's father, Raghunandan, was a small householder, but generous by nature and warm-hearted, and so remained on good terms with everyone.

As soon as Achhelal reached the house, he stood at the threshold and called out to Bachelal's mother. Sumitra was sweeping the courtyard. Catching sight of him from one corner, broom still in hand, she smiled and said, "Why are you standing at the door like a stranger? Come in, come into the courtyard."

Noticing his drawn and troubled face, she asked, "Has something happened in the night? You look deeply distressed."

With a trembling voice, Achhelal replied, "No, nothing happened in the night, but I have fallen into great difficulty. That is why I have come."

"What kind of difficulty?"

"My wife is about to give birth. Her full term has come. There is no one else at home. I know nothing of women's matters, whether good or bad. So I have come to ask you to come and take charge."

For a moment, Sumitra remained silent. Then she asked, "The pains have not started again, have they?"

"No, she is quiet for now. The pain began at dusk, but after a while it eased."

"What belongs to one belongs to all. In a community, everyone shares in one another's burdens. If my going can help you, why should I not go?"

Then, lowering her voice, she asked, "Is there rice in the house for the woman after childbirth?"

It crossed Achhelal's mind that he should not lie. After a brief pause, he said, "There is one paseri of rice in the house, bhouji."

At the mention of "one paseri of rice," Sumitra almost laughed, but checked herself. She knew that at least a month's provisions would be needed. A woman's body scarcely regained its strength within a month after childbirth. She resolved, therefore, that arrangements must be made for that period. In times of distress, the mind of a poor man often grew confused; that was why Achhelal had spoken as he had. Men, after all, understood little of the true condition of a woman in childbirth. Once he had come to call her, it became her duty to ensure that the child was safely brought into the world. Merely attending the birth would not be enough.

They were still speaking when Bachelal woke. He opened one shutter of the window and looked out. Seeing them in conversation, he unlatched the door, came over quietly, and stood beside them. Because of the presence of the daughter-in-law, Sumitra said, "Come, let us go to the outer yard."

The three of them moved to the front yard and continued their conversation there. Explaining the situation, Sumitra said to Bachelal, "Son, Achhelal's wife is about to deliver. The poor man is as frail in body as he is in means. Placing his hope in us, he has come here. There are many others in the village, yet he came to us because he has faith in us."

Bachelal lowered his head, listened to his mother, and then said, "If he has come to call you, why should I stop you?"

Sumitra replied, "But simply going there will not be enough. At the very least, provisions for a month will be needed."

"Mother, you carry the responsibility of the household. Why ask me? Do whatever you think is right."

Hope stirred in Achhelal's heart. Silently, he thought: until now, I believed there was no one in the village willing to help, but

that is not so. God has guided me well in bringing me here.

Smiling, Achhelal said to Sumitra, “It has been quite some time, bhouji. Who knows what may have happened at home by now? I should not delay any longer. Please come.”

Sumitra replied, “You go ahead, brother. I will follow shortly.”

Achhelal took his leave and set off. Sumitra then said to Bachelal, “Son, what one human being owes is to another. The service one renders today is stored in God’s keeping. For a full month, I will look after her and bear the expenses as well. God has given us enough. What do we lack?”

Bachelal replied, “Mother, do whatever you think is right. Go and take care of it.”

Rising from the outer yard, Sumitra began putting the household in order. Once she had finished her work, she set out for Achhelal’s house. Makhni lay on a bed spread in the verandah. As soon as she arrived, Sumitra asked, “Daughter, are the pains coming?”

Turning onto her side, Makhni replied, “Sister, not at the moment, but it feels as though they may begin at any time.”

Makhni had already borne two children, so she could sense what was coming. Sumitra said to Achhelal, “I am here now. Will you go and call the midwife?”

Achhelal set off for the midwife’s house, though he could scarcely bring himself to take a step in that direction. He kept thinking that, since he had not been able to pay her customary due, she might refuse to come. Still, forcing himself onward, he went. All along the way, he remained in a troubled state of mind. On one hand, he feared that if the midwife refused, the journey would be in vain. On the other, he worried about what might be happening at home in his absence.

When he reached the midwife’s place, he saw her carrying dung from the cattle shed in a wicker tray and taking it to the fields. Achhelal felt like a criminal standing in a court of law. Even so, gathering his courage, he said, “Please come to my house for a while. My wife is in labour.”

With flecks of dung still on her forehead, the midwife replied,

“I will not come. The customary due is still unpaid. How long am I expected to keep working on an empty stomach?”

Hearing this, Achhelal inwardly cursed his fate. What kind of life had God given him, that he must hear bitter words from everyone? His face tightened as he said again, “Sister, if I could not pay you this year, does that mean I never will? If times improve, I will give you double next year. In a community, people must help one another. Please come...”

Annoyed, and quickening her pace, the midwife replied, “I am not coming. Not at any price.”

Achhelal stared at her helplessly. It was as though all strength had left his body. In despair, he sat down, holding his head in both hands. What was he to do now? With all hope gone, he turned back toward home. His feet barely moved; they dragged as though sparks were flashing before his eyes. Somehow, he made his way back.

By then, as this was her third child, Makhni’s pains had lessened, and the baby was born without much difficulty. Drawing on all her experience, Sumitra left nothing lacking in her care.

As soon as Achhelal reached the threshold, his throat tightened and tears streamed down his face. Seeing him, Sumitra smiled and said, “Brother, what harm have you ever done that harm should come to you? God has given you a son. He has a round little face and strong, sturdy limbs.”

Caught between hope and despair, Achhelal’s heart surged and sank. Joy pressed forward as laughter, and sorrow as tears. At the very moment the child was born, a crow perched on the mat in Sumitra’s courtyard gave two clear calls. Hearing it, the words slipped from Bachelal’s mouth without thought: “Uncle Achhelal has been blessed with a son.”

The moment he spoke, Bachelal looked around in surprise, wondering how the words had escaped him when no one had yet announced the birth. Leaving the courtyard, he walked to the edge of the pond and stood there, listening, trying to determine whether the child had truly been born or whether the sounds were still those of labour.Sumitra was cleaning the bedding, and Achhelal had stepped out to fetch fuel for the childbirth fire when he saw Bachelal. Coming closer, he said, “Son, a boy has been born.”

At the mention of a son, one part of Bachelal felt the urge to go in and see the child. But another thought held him back; this was not the proper moment. So he quietly turned away, returned to the courtyard, and said to his wife, “Uncle Achhelal has been blessed with a son.”

At the mention of the boy, Ruma silently offered a blessing and said, “May God grant him a long life.”

The child’s sixth-day observance had passed. Having finished her household work, Sumitra returned to Achhelal’s courtyard. The evening light was fading. In a line, white egrets flew from west to east, as though playfully calling to one another. Crows darted after little boys and girls, trying to snatch bread from their hands. Tiny specks wheeled in circles overhead. The sun had begun its descent toward rest.

In the middle of the courtyard, Sumitra spread out a sack. Laying the child across her thighs, she gently massaged him and, in a soft humming voice, sang:

“Roar, O cloud, let your thunder be heard,

Flood the barren field and make it fertile.

Be born, dear little one, be born and fill our hearts with joy.

May your father hold a canopy above your head and keep your enemies at bay.

I will not be born from that helpless womb

That would lay me on a soiled cloth and call me merely ‘boy.’

Be born, dear little one, be born and fill our hearts with joy.

She will lay you on a yellow cloth and call you ‘son,’ ‘dear son.’”

Swaying gently, Sumitra continued to sing as she massaged the child. Whenever her eyes met the baby’s, it felt as though a shower of affection fell within her heart. And whenever the thought arose that no harm should ever come to him, she would gaze intently at his face.

Seated behind the matting screen, Achhelal watched Sumitra’s tenderness. Forgetting the world, he drifted inward into a quiet realm of contentment. ❑

2

As it was Sunday, Bachelal rose late. He remained lying on his bed, thinking that he would not have to go to school that day, and that there was no work at home either. There was only one pair of dhotis, one kurta, and one vest to wash. That was all the work to be done before noon. In the late afternoon, he would go to the market to buy whatever small necessities were needed for the house. The market, too, was not far; it lay just beyond the village.

After rising and finishing his morning ablutions, Bachelal came and sat on the bench in the outer room. Ruma brought him tea. Hardly had he taken two sips when he began to think of his father. And the moment his father came to mind, Bachelal began comparing himself with him. Silently, he thought: Father had been an ordinary farmer. His education had been no more than enough to write his name and village in a halting hand. His work, too, had been simple. From time to time, he would go to the registry office and serve as a witness. The whole day he remained occupied, from farming to tending cattle and livestock. Yet he possessed such qualities that wherever there was a village council, a feast, or any social gathering of consequence, he was always invited. More than that, apart from the very old, no one ever called him by name. His companions addressed him as bhai, brother, while children and grown men alike called him either Girhat Baba or Girhat Kaka. He regarded society as he regarded his own family.

"But I am a teacher," thought Bachelal. "I am honest in my work. Not a single day do I stay away from school without leave, nor do I ever arrive even a moment late. And for as long as I remain there,

I do nothing but teach the children. In other schools, as one sees, teachers come and go as they please, and even sit idly playing cards. To be sure, I do no one any favour, for I work in return for my salary. Yet, compared to other teachers, even while living honestly, I feel a great lack within myself.

And that lack is this: though I live in society, I remain cut off from it. Apart from school hours, I spend all my days and nights in the village, yet no one speaks to me, and no one comes to my door. I often feel that since I earn, I could at least offer tea and hospitality to a few people. But no one so much as looks in my direction. Nor do I go to anyone's house.

The elders say that the honour of a household lies in having a few men gathered at its threshold. But where does that happen for me? A village is not like a town or a market, where people may live in the same building yet remain strangers, belonging to different regions, speaking different tongues, and living separate lives, sharing neither joy nor sorrow. Society is not like that. It is something built by one's forefathers. People have lived together in one place for hundreds, even thousands, of years. Different castes, too, have lived in mutual affection. All have stood beside one another in times of happiness and grief. From the birth of a child to the moment of death, all have shared in one another's lives.

Why, then, is my condition so different in such a society? Have I become like a straw or leaf, tossed by the ripples of a pond and cast aside at the bank? Does society too have currents like water? And if it does, why can I not understand them? Am I not educated as well?"

The more Bachelal thought about society, the more clouded his mind became. Yet he could arrive at no understanding. By the time he had drunk half his tea, what remained in the glass had gone cold and thin. He was no longer aware either of the tea or of himself. It seemed to him as though he had wandered into such a forest that not even a single path could be found there. At times Bachelal grew deeply grave, and at times he began muttering to himself.

Sumitra came in from the courtyard, saw him, and asked, "Son, what sorrow has come over you? Has something happened?"

Bachelal replied, "No, Mother, nothing has happened. But certain things about the village keep circling in my mind, and I cannot

make sense of them."

Speaking with quiet deliberation, Sumitra began, "There may be many people in a village, but not everyone understands all the ways of village life. In a village, there are three kinds of paths. The first is the path by which society moves, the second the path by which the family moves, and the third the path by which the individual moves. A person adjusts his own course to the course of the family, and in the same way the family adjusts its course to the course of society. That is why, although all three have their separate ways of moving, they are so interwoven that people often fail to understand them clearly."

Gazing at her face, Bachelal listened to his mother and said, "Mother, I could not properly understand even what you have just said. I feel as though I understand nothing at all. It is as if one were in darkness and could see nothing."

Nodding her head, Sumitra said, "Look at your own house. There are two children; they scarcely count in these matters. There are three grown persons here. You spend the whole day occupied with thoughts of school. You rise in the morning and, by nine o'clock, after finishing your daily routines, you eat and leave for school. School ends at four. By the time you walk the mile and a half back, evening has fallen, and you are tired as well. After going out again for your bodily needs, it is already late. Then you sit at the doorstep; some days you read the Ramayana, some days the Mahabharata. When the meal is ready, you eat and go to sleep. The next day, you do the same again.

Thus the days pass. Days turn into months, and months into years. Like the bullock of an oil press, you spend your life going from home to school and from school back home. But that is not life. Life is something more. Just as, with the coming of spring, trees put forth new shoots and begin to grow, so it is with human beings. The movement of life carries a person forward in harmony with the movement of the universe itself. Through ignorance, a person fails to understand this movement and falls out of step with it.

The causes of this falling away lie in personal life, family life, and social life, each of which can hold one back even as life itself moves forward. Because of this, a person cannot keep pace with time.

Yet what of that? However great the obstacle, one must not lose courage. If a person remains alert in all his faculties, he can overcome every obstacle.

Just look at your wife. She spends the whole day occupied with cooking and caring for the children. I too do what I can. In one way or another, the household continues. But the family is one part of society; society, after all, is nothing but a collection of families. So if a family wishes to move with society, it must take hold of society's path. That is not happening here.

Think of a train. It has many wheels and many compartments, all joined one behind another, yet when it moves, they all move together. It is the same with human life."

Hearing his mother's words, Bachelal asked with the curiosity of a pupil, "And what course is our own family taking?"

Smiling, Sumitra said, "Our family has come to a standstill. It may seem to you that we are moving forward, but we are not. You may think that because you are a teacher, because you hold a good position and earn a steady income, all is well. But consider this: if we are educated and sensible, then our intelligence should be of use to others as well. Even those who are uneducated manage their work and sustain their families. Some live a little better, some a little worse, but all the same they live. Today you have a job, that is true; but without it, you too would have lived as the unlettered do.

And look at your wife as well. It is as though she has little concern for the household. I too was once married and brought here as a bride; I too was a young wife. But what I see in this house today was not so in my time. When I first came here from my parents' home, this was a full and thriving household. My father-in-law and mother-in-law were both alive. Once, after four days, I touched the hearth for the first time, and from that day onward my mother-in-law never had to attend to it again. She neither took rice out from the store nor gave me instructions. The household here was much like the one in my parents' home. All the work I did there, I did here as well. Thinking of it as my own home, I never allowed a single grain or household item to go to waste."

"Now look," Sumitra continued, "even though ours is a family of only five, we do not move together; each goes his own way. To

live in harmony means that all share in the work of the household. It should not be that one person is worn out with labour while another sits idle. Everyone in a family should understand their role and responsibility, but that is not the case here. Whether I have eaten or not, whether you have eaten or not, no one truly notices. No one pays proper attention to the cooking. What should be eaten, what is good for the body and what is harmful, these are matters no one cares to understand. Whatever pleases the tongue, even if it is harmful, is what people choose to eat. And so illness remains ever present in the house.

Just as the rays of the sun spread in many directions, so too should the work of a family bring all directions together. But that is not happening."

Bachelal interrupted, saying, "Mother, I still do not properly understand what you mean."

With patient care, Sumitra began to explain further.

"Son, look. Just as in the village some families move forward, some slip backward, and some come to a standstill, so that the village as a whole is unable to advance, the same thing happens within a family. In a family too, some people try to move ahead, some remain half involved and half withdrawn, and some, through laziness and ignorance, keep falling behind. That is why a family does not move with the force and direction it ought to have. And not only that, this same disease exists within the individual as well. Some people wish to keep themselves aligned with the movement of time, while others fail to understand its course and keep drifting backward. Until you understand this properly, your mind will know no peace, nor will your family move forward."

Sumitra's words left Bachelal completely bewildered. He could make no sense of what was right and what was not. Scratching his head, he said, "Mother, when my mind is steadier, explain it to me again. If I do not understand it once, I will try a second time. If not the second, then a third. But without understanding it, nothing can truly be done."

Hearing this, Sumitra smiled and said, "Son, when your father was alive, we used to have stone weights in the house for weighing and measuring. One day he came home and said that proper iron seers and half seers had now become available. I asked him, 'Then shall

we throw away the stone weights?' He said, 'Why should we throw them away? We shall compare the iron seer with the stone one. If the weight proves a little less or a little more, then so be it; we shall simply reckon it by our own measure.'

"Son, at present your mind is not yet settled. Go now and attend to your own work. I too have much to do. When your mind grows clear, then we shall speak further."

Still dazed and inwardly unsettled, Bachelal went to wash the clothes. Entering the courtyard, he took a bucket, a lota, the clothes, and some soap, and went to the hand pump. Setting the clothes and soap aside, he first cleaned the small platform around the pump. Then he filled the bucket with water and soaked the clothes. Taking them out one by one, he rubbed soap over both sides of each garment and set them aside. Once all the clothes had been soaped, he began washing them, starting with those to which the soap had first been applied.

Taking a hoe, Sumitra went to the garden patch to dig up a yam. She had planted the yams in rows along the ridge. It was a fine, three-pronged variety, and some of the plants had even flowered. Reaching the patch, she stood for a moment, trying to decide which plant to dig up. All the plants were sturdy and flourishing. But in one corner, among the leaves, half the foliage of one plant had turned yellow. Seeing this, she chose that plant.

So that the yam would not be damaged, she began digging widely around it. At last, she unearthed a large Hyderabadi yam, weighing seven or eight kilos. But there was not a single good shoot on it. Seeing this, Sumitra thought that if there had been even one, she might have replanted it, but that was not to be. Brushing off the soil, she cut the vine into pieces, placed them back into the pit, and covered them with earth.

She tried to carry both the yam and the hoe at once, but could not manage it. Each time she lifted the yam with both hands and tried to hold it in one while picking up the hoe with the other, it slipped and fell. She tried several times, but failed. At last, she gave up. Carrying the yam with both hands, she set it down near the pump, then went back for the hoe. Soil clung to both the hoe and the yam, so both would have to be washed properly.

Seeing his mother standing there, Bachelal hurriedly began rinsing the clothes. Then, gathering them up, he went to spread them on the line.

Sumitra placed the yam beneath the hand pump and began working the handle. She pumped it up and down ten or fifteen times, turning the yam as she did so. Even then, soil remained lodged in its cracks and hollows. So she filled a squat bucket with water and, using a lota, washed the yam, the hoe, and her hands and feet. Returning to the courtyard, she said to her daughter-in-law, "It is Sunday today, and the child will be at home as well, so make some bari from the yam. It is a fine one. Fry a couple of slices too."

Hearing this, the daughter-in-law replied, her face and hands animated as she spoke, "Your hands are so used to it that it never seems to trouble you. As for me, the very sight of yam makes my skin itch. Make whatever you like. Meanwhile, I will light the stove and cook the rice. Everyone has their own taste. He prefers old-fashioned things; new ones do not appeal to him."

Hearing her daughter-in-law's words, Sumitra wondered inwardly whether she should respond. If she remained silent at such a moment, she might be pushed aside; but if she spoke, it might lead to a quarrel. In any case, she would do what she thought right, yet if harsh words arose, the work itself would suffer. And the longer the cooking was delayed, the later the meal would be. Even so, she felt a restless urge to reply.

As she cut the yam in half and began to quarter it, she noticed its rich colour and caught its fragrance. Then she said, "Daughter, how can something that has always been good suddenly become bad? As long as we live, we will continue to eat such things. What you consider inferior is not inferior at all. The difference lies in how we see it. That difference in outlook has turned into this judgment of good and bad.

"And the reason our outlooks differ is that our lives have been shaped in different ways. You come from a salaried household; I come from a farming one. Your father earned cash, and with it you bought what you needed from the market. But I have lived in a family that grows what it consumes. I know how things are planted and how they must be tended. That is the difference between what seems good

to me and what seems good to you."

Bachelal, too, was listening from the outer room to the conversation between the two women. Sumitra sat in the middle of the courtyard preparing the yam, while inside the house her daughter-in-law kept muttering. Sumitra, however, paid little attention and did not take it to heart.

Just then, Makhni arrived carrying the baby. The moment Sumitra saw the child in her arms, she said, almost scolding her, "Why have you brought a month-old baby out into the courtyard? What if an evil spirit catches him?"

Laughing, Makhni replied, "Sister, people may call this someone else's courtyard, but is it not mine as well? Should I feel shy even to step into my own courtyard?"

Hearing this, Sumitra felt a pang of regret and said, "I did not mean it that way. The child is still very small, that is all, and must be protected. A son is a treasure. He will go out into the world soon enough..."

Then, calling out to her daughter-in-law, she said, "This is the first day the child has come into the courtyard. Bring some oil and ubtan. And if there is no ubtan, then bring the oil. Put out the stove for now. First rub the child properly."

Ruma came out carrying oil and a cloth, which she spread in the courtyard. Setting the small bowl of oil beside her, she took the baby into her lap. Stretching out her legs, she laid the child across her thighs. Looking at the baby's face, Ruma thought to herself, how fortunate Makhni is that God has given her such a beautiful child.

Turning the baby gently in her hands, another thought arose within her: how lightly people say that one person is born with ill fortune and another with good. If fate were truly written on the brow, then daughters would be born only to the unfortunate, and sons only to the fortunate. But in God's eyes, all are equal. All are His children. What kind of father would make such distinctions among his own offspring? People invent such notions of fate and place the blame upon God.

Looking at the yam, Makhni said, "This yam is as rich as a roe-filled fish. Sister, do wash your hands and come away. I will prepare

it."

Taking the yam and the knife from Sumitra's hands, Makhni set about preparing it.

Sumitra washed her hands and rubbed mustard oil into her palms until the itching subsided. Then she went over to the bedding and said to her daughter-in-law, "Daughter, bring the baby here. I shall massage him. You go to the stove."

Placing the child in her mother-in-law's lap, Ruma went to light the hearth. As Sumitra laid the baby across her thighs, she said to Makhni, "Cut the middle slices separately. Those should be fried. Boil the rest and make bari from it."

With a smile, Makhni replied, "It is such a fine yam, sister, that it will melt the moment it touches the fire. And it will taste so delicious that words will fail. Beside it, milk and curd are worth nothing at all."

As Sumitra massaged the baby, she hummed softly and sang:

"Which father ploughed the field

and raised the mustard there?

Which mother ground and pressed it,

to rub upon the child with care?

The elder father ploughed the field,

and there the mustard grew.

This mother pressed the oil herself,

and now anoints the baby too."

By the time Makhni had finished preparing the yam, Sumitra too had finished tending to the child. She placed a small kohl mark on his forehead to ward off evil. Handing the baby back to Makhni, Sumitra gave her a seer and a half of rice and enough yam for a proper vegetable dish. ❑

3

☰

Sumitra woke in the middle of the night. Rising from her bedding, she stepped into the courtyard and looked up at the sky. It was a dark night, yet the heavens were clear. The stars shone like blossoms of the jasmine. A little distance from the house, on the eastern side, stood a bamboo grove. Among its clusters were the nests of mynas. A hawk had seized one of the birds and flown off with it. The moment it vanished, the other mynas began shrieking in confusion.

Sumitra stood listening to their cries. Unable to make sense of those sounds in the stillness of night, a thought arose in her mind: something must have happened, that is why they are crying so. After standing there for a while, and still unable to judge how much of the night remained, she returned and lay down again.

Unbidden, another thought came to her: just as Achhelal lived within society and yet apart from it, so too did Bachelal. That day the poor man had spoken truly when he said, "I go to no one's house, nor does anyone come to mine. I speak with no one, nor do I know what happens in the village..."

Just then Ruma rose and came near. Sumitra began speaking to her daughter-in-law.

"When I first came here after marriage, I remained within the courtyard for two or three years. My mother-in-law would not let me step outside it. She herself managed all the work beyond. In the month of Kartik, from the morning of Chhath onward, the two of us–mother-in-law and daughter-in-law–would sing Shama songs. All the

women of the village sang Sama songs in their own courtyards. She would begin, and I would follow. Three years passed in this way."

"What I am about to tell you happened in the fourth year. On the day of immersing Shama, her health suddenly worsened. She had such a severe cough and wheezing in her chest that she could scarcely speak. Yet how could the day of immersion pass without observance?

By late afternoon, she had brought home a bundle of paddy sheaves. We threshed them. The grain was so scant that there was hardly any need to pound or winnow it properly. While my mother-in-law separated the grain, I took up the pestle and mortar and began pounding. I prepared flattened rice. I had already soaked raw rice in a bowl since noon and now ground it into a paste. By then, the light had begun to fade, and with so much still to be done, I worked in great haste. Her health was poor, yet she continued helping me.

Until that moment, we had not yet coloured the Shama figures, nor made the little birds of Vrindavan with their scattered grain. There had simply been no time.

In our haste, we shaped all the Shama-Chakeva figures from the rice paste and set them in a bamboo tray to dry. For colouring them, we had only a single packet of pink dye. But everything could not be coloured in one shade alone. At the very least, red, green, yellow, and black were needed. The two of us were at a loss.

Then suddenly it occurred to her that green could be made by crushing bean leaves, and yellow from the stalks of singhar (jasmine) flowers. At once she plucked ten or twelve bean leaves and brought them to me to grind, while she herself went to gather the flowers. I began grinding the leaves, and she stripped the stalks from the blossoms. My mind grew calmer, for I realized that soot could serve as black.

Once the colours were ready, we painted the figures together. And just as we finished, it struck her that we had not yet made the wicker dog, the drummer, or the sweet-seller. What was to be done now? The ritual had to be completed, one way or another."

After a short pause, she began again:

"Puzzled, my mother-in-law said, 'Daughter, knead a little clay and make those three as well.' But in such haste, how were they

to dry? Even so, I made all three. Because they were still wet, we neither shaped them properly nor coloured them. We set them in order in the bamboo tray and turned to the cooking.

My mother-in-law went to the cattle shed, and I began preparing the meal. The cooking was scarcely finished when Shama songs began in the northern quarter of the village. We served Father and her, and then the two of us ate. The plates, water pots, and utensils were rinsed and set aside, and the lamp was lit. Then we sat down to sing.

But the moment she began the song of family god, she was seized by a fit of coughing. Once it started, it went on for a long time and would not stop. I began pressing her chest and rubbing her back. At last, the coughing eased. As soon as it did, she said, 'Daughter, I will not be able to sing. But tonight is the night of immersion, and it would not be right to leave it incomplete. Sing whatever you can and carry the observance through.'

Hearing her insistence, I felt a quiet confidence rise within me. Now she would see what I was capable of. At first, I protested and said that I did not know the songs. But then I thought it was no use hiding one's ability. So I began to sing. I led, and she followed. Because of the cough, she could do little more than hum along.

We sang the Gosaini (family god) song in the courtyard, then lifted the tray and, singing the Batgabni (song on the way), set out toward the open ground. By the time we reached it, that song too had ended. We placed the tray there and began the Shama songs. No sooner had the first one ended than my mother-in-law said, 'Now sing five in a row, one after another.'

The first song she knew, so she supported me by humming. But she did not know the second, and at times she fell silent. I saw all this, yet I continued in my own rhythm. Just as rice pours out in a rush when the mouth of a full granary is opened, so it was with me. In a single, unbroken flow, I sang ten or twelve Shama songs.

All the women of the village who had gathered for Shama immersed their figures and returned to their courtyards. We too immersed ours and came back home, singing sohar (pleasure) songs."

"Then, one by one, women from nearby houses began to arrive. Others followed, and soon they too joined the gathering. We sang one

sohar, and then I began another. My mother-in-law was unwell, so, somewhat irritated, she went off to lie down. Even so, I continued and sang five sohars.

The younger brides, covering their mouths to hide their laughter, whispered, ‘Elder sister must once have been part of a dancing circle, that is why she sings with such lively movement of the hands.’ From her bedding, my mother-in-law would now and then hum along and offer words of praise.

After the sohars, I began a samdaun (parting song). But the younger girls could not quite grasp its spirit. Then my mother-in-law called out from inside, ‘Can a samdaun be sung so half-heartedly? It must be sung with a restless heart, like true human sorrow.’ Admitting her own limitation, Mangli said, ‘Sister-in-law, leave the samdaun and sing a barahmasa (song on twelve months) instead.’ Everyone eagerly agreed. So I began the barahmasa:”

“Raghubar, do not yet leave Mithila town, Do not leave Sita in the bridal chamber.

In Aghan we shall wed Sita, in Pus prepare her bridal bed,

In Magh we shall fill Raghubar’s stores, do not leave Sita in the chamber.

In Phagun we shall play the spring festival, in Chait we shall string garlands,

In Baisakh we shall fan Raghubar, do not leave Sita in the chamber.

In Jeth the days and nights grow hot, in Asadh it rains without cease,

In Sawan we shall swing on the swing, do not leave Sita in the chamber.

In Bhadav the nights are dark, in Asin we wait in hope,

In Kartik you may go to Mithila town, but not from Sita’s bridal room...”

Ruma listened intently to her mother-in-law’s words. Seeing her daughter-in-law’s deep attention, Sumitra continued:

“As I sang the barahmasa, the night grew late, and the dew soaked through everyone’s clothes. Yet no one was willing to rise

and leave. They lingered, murmuring, smiling, unwilling to part. I myself had grown tired. At last, with folded hands, I said, 'It is very late now. Please go home. From tomorrow onward you may come again, listen, and learn.' Only then did they leave. I too went to sleep."

"Those were not days like now, when women were educated or had the means to learn. To learn even a single song took many days. Whatever I learned, I learned from my mother. I learned while working, and again at night, after play and food, when I would go to massage her limbs. And once a song had settled in my memory, I would sing it back to her."

"From the very next day, people began coming to learn songs, from elderly women to young brides. The daughters of the village would come whenever they pleased, but daughters-in-law and young wives came in the late afternoon or towards evening. Seeing that the work of the courtyard was being disturbed, I asked them all to come at dusk. And so they did. For six months, I taught them songs.

Then, when he passed away, the burden of the household fell upon me. The two children were still very small. What could I do? I had to manage everything, from the fields and garden to the work of the house and courtyard. I became so entangled in my responsibilities that I had no thought left for anyone else. If there was a wedding in the village, or a sacred-thread ceremony, I would be called. And I would go and sing everything, from the Gosaini songs to the samdaun. But gradually, all that fell away.

Even now, if those women pass this way, they make a point of meeting me. But by now, they too have children and grandchildren of their own. Each remains absorbed in her own family. And I too have grown old; I can no longer work as I once did.

So long as I remained closely connected with the people of the village, I understood all that was good and bad around me. I knew whose house had guests, and in whose home how much salt and oil were being used. Time has made life smaller.

Still, so long as I live, I keep myself busy all day, lest I become a burden to others. Even now, I grow vegetables and greens in the garden, I cook, I sweep the courtyard and the house, and I plaster the

floors with smooth clay. I never feel that I have grown weak. The moment I step away from work, life itself would begin to feel like a burden.

And what is life, after all? Life is simply this: to pass it in laughter and playfulness. What has come so far has passed well enough; what lies ahead will reveal itself in time."

Ruma continued to listen attentively to her mother-in-law's words. Dawn had come. Small birds gathered in flocks, flew out from their nests, and crossed the sky, singing their morning songs and enacting the quiet play of life. ❑

4

Having swept the courtyard, Sumitra went to sweep the outer threshold. But before she began, her eyes fell upon the bullock. Resting the broom by the doorway, she sat down, covering part of her face with her hand, and gazed at it. At the sight of the animal's condition, tears began to stream down her face.

By then, Bachelal had risen from sleep and come out to the front. Silently, Sumitra began to reflect: so long as Bachelal's father had lived, there had always been a pair of bullocks tied at the post. He fed them well and kept them in fine condition. He would not allow even a fly to settle on their bodies, nor a single tick to cling to them. Just as people care for their own children, so had he tended the cows and bullocks.

While he was alive, I too was still young. The two of us together managed everything, from house and courtyard to field and furrow. But now I have grown old. How can I tend cattle and bullocks anymore? If by some mischance one were to kick or butt me, I would lie helpless at home with broken limbs. Better not to go near them at all.

Bachelal spends the whole day occupied with school. And the daughter-in-law comes from a household where she has scarcely had any dealings with cattle. For want of grass and fodder, the bullock pines at the post. There is no one to give it even a handful of grass or a bucket of water. At times, I have thrown a little grass before it or given it some water, but how can cattle be properly reared like that?

As these thoughts passed through Sumitra's mind, her tears continued to fall.

In front of the outer room, Bachelal paced about, cleaning his teeth with a twig. Achhelal, having no lime in the house, had come with a little tobacco in his palm to ask for some. Seeing the tears streaming down Sumitra's face, Bachelal asked, "Mother, why are you crying?"

Sumitra gave no reply. Wiping her eyes with the end of her sari, she looked toward Bachelal. Achhelal, too, stood there silently, tobacco in hand. He did not have the courage to ask for lime, yet he said nothing else either. At the sight of Sumitra's sorrowful face, both Achhelal and Bachelal grew somber. The three of them stood like the points of a triangle, and not one spoke.

After a moment, Achhelal asked hesitantly, "Why are you so troubled, bhouji? What sorrow weighs on your heart?"

Again wiping her tears with her sari, Sumitra said, "Come here. Sit near me. I will tell you. Son Bachelal, you too go and wash your face and hands, and then come."

Bachelal went to the hand pump to wash. Achhelal stepped closer and said, "Because of the lime, I have not even been able to take my tobacco, bhouji. My mouth is craving for it. Please bring me a little lime first."

"Very well. Sit. I will bring it from the courtyard."

With that, Sumitra went inside. From the threshold, Bachelal called out to his wife to bring tea. Achhelal placed two pinches of tobacco and lime between his lips. Then Sumitra returned and began speaking to them both:

"This happened some time ago. At my parents' home, there was a Gaur Babu who gave us a fine heifer. We reared her for six months, and then she came into heat. Exactly nine months later, she calved, and in time became a splendid milch cow. She gave two seers of milk in the morning and one and a half in the evening. In every way, she was a true cow.

Whenever needed, she could be milked at dawn or dusk. She was very gentle. She calved eleven times. Three months after calving, she would conceive again, and even then she would continue to give milk for another six months. When only three months remained before the next calving, I would stop milking her myself.

She was as fine in nature as in form. There was nothing she would refuse to eat or drink. Whether it was chopped straw or scraps of vegetables, she would eat whatever was placed before her.

But once, when she was three months away from calving, she fell terribly ill. The people of the village suggested many remedies, and we tried them all, but instead of improving, her suffering only grew worse. It seemed to me then–what sin had I committed in some past life that such a flourishing garden before my eyes should be laid waste like this?

Hope broke in both our hearts. In our sorrow, even food and water lost their taste."

"Looking at the calf, my heart melted with pity. The cow herself was in such pain that she would scarcely let the calf come near her. It was as though all awareness of the little one had left her. Siriya's cow had recently calved, so we took a little milk from her and fed the calf with a small cup. But what could that small amount of borrowed milk do for it? Little by little, we began to accustom the calf to tender grass and bits of khichri. All the while, the cow lay there, lowing in pain and thrashing all four legs.

I kept thinking, this cow came from my parents' home. If she dies, they will say I did not care for her properly. Foam began to gather at her mouth. My husband was even more distressed than I was. In his sorrow, he would lie face down on the bench for long stretches, breaking again and again into sobs.

Then, at such a time, a holy man happened to pass along the road. His name was Devan, and he had long hair and a flowing beard. Hearing the cow's cries, he stopped a little way off and listened. Then he came slowly to the door. With my head covered, I sat sunk in grief. As soon as he reached the threshold, he began to examine the cow closely. After a brief silence, he asked, 'How many days has the cow been like this?'

With a trembling heart, I replied, 'Seven days.'

Then he asked, 'Where is the master of the house?' I pointed toward the bench. With a gesture, he called him over."

After a brief pause, she continued:

"As soon as he came near, the holy man smiled and said, 'The

cow will not die. Take the grief out of your hearts.' Then, taking a root from his shoulder bag, he said, 'Grind this very finely on the stone slab.'

I washed the root, ground it on the slab, and brought it back. He mixed it in a full glass of water and made the cow drink it. Then the three of us began to talk. After a short while, the cow's lowing ceased. She lifted her eyes and looked toward her calf. The moment her gaze fell upon it, she called out softly, and the calf answered.

We had left the calf untethered. It ran over at once and stood beside her. Drawing in her legs, the cow settled properly and lifted her neck. At the sight of that raised neck, it felt as though life itself had returned within us. Joy stirred in my heart.

He said, 'The sickness is leaving her now. She will survive.' And even as he spoke, the cow rose to her feet. All four legs trembled, but she stood. The calf moved toward her udder, and he quickly fastened the tether in place. I brought grass from the house and set it before her. The cow began to eat.

My heart lit up. Just as in the cold season a dark rock lies covered with dew, and the moment sunlight falls upon it, it shines like silver, so it was with me."

After a short pause, she continued:

"Your father said to Devan, 'Mahatmaji, please stay and take a meal.' Smiling, Devan replied, 'I shall certainly eat, but I will eat rice pudding made from this cow's milk. Until then, give me a lota of water to drink.'

Hearing the holy man's words, our hearts brightened at once. I began gathering whatever grass I could find near the house and setting it before the cow, while he went to cut bamboo leaves. Each time I placed a small bundle before her, she devoured it at once. The ribs that had seemed tightly drawn together began to loosen. I drew water from the well and brought it. The moment I set it before her, she drank an entire bucket. Then I brought another, and she emptied that as well.

By then he had returned with the leaves. The two of us went on stripping and placing them before her. She ate nearly half a load. Then Devan said, 'Now milk her.' Her udder hung almost to her

knees. We loosened the tether and let the calf go. It ran to her at once and began to suckle. He himself sat down to milk her, and the bucket quickly filled.

Seeing the milk, I thought to myself that the milk of a sick cow must surely be tainted. But Devan said, 'The virtue of the medicine will have reached the milk as well.' The two of us had been half-starved for three days. While the cow lay ill, we had scarcely felt hunger; but now our appetite returned. I went to cook, and he sat talking with Devan. I made rice pudding from all the milk. First we served the Mahatma, and then we ate.

This bullock here is the offspring of that very cow. The moment I saw its condition, all those old memories returned, and that is why tears came to my eyes."

Ruma came with the tea, and all of them began to drink. After finishing his tea, Achhelal mixed tobacco with lime again. Once he had taken it, he asked, "And what happened after that?"

Sumitra continued:

"After we had eaten and drunk, Devan was about to leave. I caught hold of his shoulder bag and said, 'At least stay for today. You can go tomorrow.' He agreed.

That night, after supper, Devan began to tell us the story of his life. The two of us sat listening while he spoke. He said, 'When I was only ten years old, both my mother and father fell ill. I was too young to earn. The household had run on their labour, but suddenly both were stricken. There was nothing at all in the house to eat. They were already wasting from sickness, and there was not a grain to feed them. We could give them only water.

I remained by their side the whole time. When I saw them writhing in such pain, I too suffered. But what could I do? No way opened before me. On the fifth day, both of them died. While they lay ill, no one from the community came, nor did anyone offer help. But once they had died, a few people came only to ask what had happened.

I said nothing to anyone. A thought arose in my mind: what was the use of living in a society where no one cared for another? Both of them died on their bedding inside the house…'"

“Then I gathered whatever mats, old screens, and bits of thatch lay in the courtyard and threw them all into the house. I thought that when the time came to cremate them, there ought to be new cloth. But then I said to myself, while they were alive, they wore only torn and worn garments, so what need was there for new cloth merely for burning?

I piled everything together and set the house on fire. When the flames had taken hold, I stood in the courtyard on one leg, folded my hands, and made a vow that I would not remain in such a society. In a society where people go hungry for want of grain, live unclothed for want of clothing, and die of illness for want of medicine, to remain even for a moment is cowardice.

So I left the courtyard and went away. As long as I remained within the bounds of the village, I kept turning back again and again to look at the fire. But by the time I reached the boundary, the house had burned down completely. Standing there, I folded my hands, let five drops of tears fall, and in that way performed my parents’ last rites. Then I went on.

The moment I crossed the boundary, a strange stirring arose in my heart. To the left of the road, I saw a flowering tree, very beautiful, with soft green grass spread beneath it. Seeing such a place, I sat down under it. It seemed to me that both of them, Mother and Father, had followed me and climbed into the tree. I raised my eyes and looked up, but saw nothing.

A bumblebee moved from flower to flower, drinking nectar. A gentle breeze was blowing, and in its movement there seemed to be a sound. Startled, I cupped my ear and listened closely. The voice seemed like my father’s. Recognizing that tone, I listened more intently. It seemed he was saying something, but I could not make it out clearly.”

After a brief pause, she continued:

“In my heart, I said to him, ‘By shedding five drops of tears, I have fulfilled my duty. Now I am free. Why then have you come after me?’

At this, he began to speak, his voice heavy with grief: ‘Son, you are only ten years old, and no blame can fall upon you. At this age, you should be eating and playing, not earning and labouring. So

what fault is yours? It was my great wish to educate you and make you into a worthy man, but that remained only in my heart. Yet no blame is mine either. Had I lived, perhaps things would have been different–but I too have died.

I bless you, my son. Now that you have left home, go out and see the world. Everything is to be found in it. Remain always among people. It is among people that Saraswati dwells. If you live among them, you will grow into a man of wisdom. But remember one thing always: earn your livelihood by your own labour. Never become indebted to anyone, not even by a single coin.'"

"With my father's blessing, it was as though a new light came over me, and a new strength awakened within. The distinctions between rice and millet vanished; the difference between Ganges water and pond water disappeared; the contrast between the fragrance of cultivated flowers and the scent of wild blossoms in the jungle faded away. Even the distinction between fair and dark human beings dissolved. The moment this new ardour arose, I stood and set off once more.

Just as I began to leave, my mother's voice seemed to come from the tree. I stopped and listened. She said, 'Son, it was my great desire to see a full and flourishing household, but all has been swept away. Still, if you have truly been born my son, you will surely see the world. Otherwise, many like you wander, collapse, and die unseen.'

My body burned with hunger, yet the charioteer of discernment within me urged me onward, like a spirited horse drawing a chariot. As I walked, I reached a village in the wintertime. A little apart from it, near an embankment, lived a family. It was early morning, and the sun had already risen. There were two children in the family, perhaps five and seven years old, both naked. Behind the house, they were gathering sticks and leaves to build a fire.

I stopped there. It occurred to me that I might help them, so I began spreading dry leaves and straw. One of the children brought a live ember from the courtyard, and together we lit the fire. Then the three of us sat beside it, warming ourselves. Gradually, my body grew warm.

After a while, the children's mother came and set before them

a leaf plate of rice and vegetables. She was perhaps thirty or thirty-five, yet looked worn before her time. Seeing me, she asked, 'Son, which village are you from?'

I replied, 'I have no village now. My parents are dead. I am going out to see the world. As long as I live, I shall keep walking–but I will not leave the world unseen.'

At the sight of me, the poor woman felt pity. She took the children's plate, went into the courtyard, and returned with whatever rice and vegetables remained in the pot. The three of us ate together.

After washing my hands and face and drinking water, I was about to leave when the woman said, 'No, son, do not go today. Just as I raise these two children, so I will raise you as well.'

Hearing her words, I stayed.

Son Bachelal, all that night Devan continued telling the story of his life, and we listened. But now it has grown quite late, and there is much work to be done. Another time, I shall tell you what came next."

"Just as a man, upon waking, beholds the morning, so it was with Achhelal and Bachelal. A smile began to spread across their faces. Though they still sat gazing intently at Sumitra, something within their hearts had begun to stir. It was like the water of a pond during an earthquake, rising in waves to the very banks, then slowly settling back into place. So too did their hearts begin to move within them.

Achhelal said to Sumitra, 'Bhouji, never before today have I heard such a tale. Listening to it, I feel as though my inner eyes have opened.'

Sumitra was about to reply when the bullock lowed for water. Hearing it, she said to Bachelal, 'Son, the bullock is thirsty. Bring a bucket from the courtyard and give it water.'

Bachelal obeyed. He brought a bucket, filled it at the hand pump, and set it before the animal. The bullock drained it completely. He then returned to the pump for another bucket. After watering it again, he placed chopped fodder in the manger. As soon as the fodder fell, the bullock began eating greedily, like a starving man who no longer distinguishes between seasoned and bland food.

Seeing this, Sumitra smiled. Then she said to Bachelal,

'Son, you are young, and so is your wife. But...'

Startled, Bachelal asked, 'But what?'

Sumitra continued, 'This: your wife seeks to avoid labour. Her mind is always inclined toward ease and comfort. She does not understand the true bond between husband and wife. And you, though you teach others, do not seem to understand your own life.

I say this because I have lived in this courtyard for forty years. My youth passed very differently from hers. It brings me some satisfaction that I raised my son and made him a teacher; that is why I consider my labour worthwhile. But your wife's habits and manner are turning this household into one given over to indulgence. Yet a human being is meant not for indulgence, but for discipline.

I have grown old. How many more days remain for me? And still, when I look at this family, my heart sinks. As long as these eyes can see, how can I bear to watch this house decline? But what am I to do? Would it be right to correct and reproach at every step? How much can you manage alone? You are not an iron machine.

The fields are no fewer than before, and once they sustained the household well. Beyond the family, we were connected to society too. But now it pains me to see how far we have fallen, while you both believe you are moving forward, that you are prospering. Today, the household has two sources of income: your service and the land. Yet all the while, you are slipping backward.'"

Bachelal interrupted and said, 'Mother, how could I understand as much as you do?'

Smiling, Sumitra replied, 'Son, today it seems to me that your vision is beginning to change. For if you had understood this earlier, you would have tried to learn it earlier as well. But whenever one awakes, that is dawn enough. In life, the first thing everyone must understand is his own limit and measure. Until a person knows his true place, he remains lost in life.

You may think that we are either very poor or very rich. But once you begin to look before and behind yourself, you will realise that there are people wealthier than we are, and poorer than we are too. As you can see, even what you have, Achhelal does not. When

the stomach is full, the thoughts of the mind too tend to be good. But how can that happen with a burning stomach?'

Letting out a long breath, Bachelal said, 'Hm... yes...'

'Yes, you have understood rightly. A hungry stomach burns the mind. And where the mind is scorched, how can affection arise? Affection does not come merely by speaking of it or by listening to sermons. Until a bridge of affection is built between two people, resentment will continue to remain from one human being toward another. And so long as resentment remains, how can deceit and trickery, dishonesty and malice, violence and destruction ever come to an end?'

With a helpless air, Bachelal asked, 'Then what are we to do, Mother?'

Smiling, Sumitra began, 'Just as I served Achhelal's son at the time of his birth, so shall I continue to do throughout life. God has given everyone two hands, two feet, a body of three and a half cubits, and above all the greatest treasure of all, the wealth of understanding.

The saddest thing among us is this: a few shrewd and calculating people have seized hold of wealth, and because of that poverty has grown so terribly. Poor people are burning in the fire of hunger like gourds thrown into an oven. And so a great mountain has risen between the two sides.

Poor Achhelal has been left behind in means, in bodily strength, and in understanding alike. He has lived until now in a broken and uprooted home, so when was he ever to get the chance to gain knowledge? I know the path shown by Devan. That is why, just as I regard you as my son, I regard that poor man in the same way.'

With thoughtful concern, Bachelal asked, 'How are we to make Uncle Achhelal our equal in strength?'

'From this very moment,' she said, 'place in Achhelal's hands the charge of the fields and the care of the bullocks. You may continue with your service, but the farming side has nearly died away. At first this may seem like a burden to you, but it is not so. What is needed is to awaken the dormant strength within a human being. The moment that strength awakens, a man begins to behold his own transformed self. The fields that now lie fallow will begin to yield

gold. Then your household income will increase, and that poor man's family too will be able to live in gladness and peace.'

Hearing his mother's words, Bachelal said to Achhelal, 'Uncle, from today your family and mine are one. From this very moment, begin taking charge of the fields. There are five kathas of orchard land. Build your house on one part of it, and the rest will still yield produce. If the houses stand together in one place, there will also be protection from thieves and rogues.

I teach the children a lesson about a clod of earth and a leaf. When each looked at its own life, the clod thought, "If rain comes, I shall dissolve," and the leaf thought, "If the wind rises, I shall be blown away." So both felt their lives to be uncertain. Then the two thought, "If we become friends, our lives may pass in laughter and ease." So they became friends. Whenever the wind rose, the clod held the leaf down and saved it; and whenever rain fell, the leaf covered the clod and protected it. Is it not the same with human beings?'

Hearing Bachelal's changed thoughts, Achhelal said with deep emotion, 'Son, in the heart of a poor man there is neither deceit nor intrigue, neither pride nor wounded honour. Even if someone insults me, what can I do to him? What do I possess with which I might defend my honour?'

Then, turning towards Sumitra, he said, 'It is in my heart too, bhouji, that just as you have made me your own and raised me like one of your sons, so I too shall serve you, taking you for my mother.' ❑

5

☰

Bachelal went to school. As it was a festival day, the school was open, but the pupils were absent. At first, he was taken aback, wondering why the students had not come, but after a while, someone's remark made him realise that it was indeed a festival day. Even so, holding fast to his sense of duty, Bachelal resolved not to leave the school before four o'clock.

Placing a chair on the verandah, he sat there alone and began reflecting on his life. The way he had thought until now began to change after hearing his mother's views. As he shifted the direction of his thinking, many things grew clearer. When he lifted his eyes and looked ahead, everything seemed transformed.

The moment his thoughts turned to his mother, the words escaped him unbidden: 'Mother is Saraswati herself. There is much to be learned from her. Just as a human being, though possessing immense strength, fails through ignorance to recognise it, so it has been with me.

Every person ought to fix an aim and devote himself to it with all his heart and soul. Only then does the meaning of life become clear. Until now, whatever I understood, I carried out sincerely enough, but that is an uncertain way of proceeding. If people set out to reach a place, one may go slowly and another at a moderate pace, yet the one who moves swiftly reaches success sooner and still finds time for other tasks.

But how is that pace to become swift? That is the real question. And while it is certainly my duty to understand for myself, it is equally necessary to help others understand. Yet one's first duty is to

oneself.

I am a teacher. I spend eight hours teaching children, which is one-third of the full twenty-four hours of day and night. And when I consider my wife as well… the younger child remains mostly with Mother, and the elder girl spends most of her time at school. From sweeping the courtyard and house to helping with the cooking, it is Mother who stands behind the work. Then how much work truly remains for a young woman?

Surely the deficiency lies somewhere in our thinking. Is married life merely for producing children? Is the burden of maintaining the household the responsibility of the man alone? Is it considered honourable that a man should toil somewhere in the world to earn, while the woman never steps beyond the boundary of the house? And if women do not stand on their own feet, are men alone to blame, or do women share that responsibility as well?

Can a life of dependence ever be pleasant for anyone? Is it not a life of suffering for all? There are countless such questions. They cannot be resolved by thought alone, for they have already taken the form of lived problems. Only action can solve them. Yet even action meets a hundred obstacles, obstacles that prevent it from taking shape at all. Then what is to be done?'

As so many thoughts rose within him, Bachelal got up from his chair and began pacing the school courtyard. Just as half-dried firewood, when placed upon a flame, gives off more smoke than blaze and refuses to catch fire fully, so it was with his mind. Yet without flame, how can there be light? It was within this very tension that Bachelal found himself caught.

At this moment, he was neither a teacher instructing his pupils nor a man buying packets of tobacco for his wife. He was neither the son of a farming household nor the son-in-law of a senior office clerk. Instead, he was like the tender green grass spread across the earth in a dense forest, sustaining itself in quiet ease beneath everything from low shrubs to towering trees.

Does that grass take no delight in its own life? Surely it does. It too adorns itself, ripens into full youth, and waits day and night for its beloved, hoping that this firm body it now possesses may be plucked and turned into nourishment for the cow that yields nectar-

like milk. Am I not, then, a creator of that nectar as well?

An unbidden thought arose in Bachelal's mind: had he now become like that wandering holy man who seems to move apart from his own body?

After pacing for some time, Bachelal went to the hand pump, washed his face and hands, and drank some water. Just as heated iron cools the moment it touches water, so it was with him as soon as he drank. Wiping his face and hands with the end of his dhoti, he looked at the clock. It was four o'clock. He lifted the chair, placed it inside the room, shut the door, locked it, and set off for home.

His mind was unlike what it was on other days. Just as a habitual drinker, when the intoxication begins to fade, remains in a strange daze, so it was with Bachelal. He had little awareness of the road or of where his feet were falling. His mind wandered in the world of thought.

Again and again, it came to him that the strength lying dormant within him had to be awakened. But how was it to be awakened? Then another thought arose. An hour and a half each was spent in going to school and returning. If he were to buy a bicycle, at least half that time could be saved. That would mean an hour and a half gained.

More than that, even if he were five or ten minutes late, he could make up the time by travelling more quickly. Bathing and eating too took an hour and a half or two hours; even there, some time might be saved. In the early morning, he lingered too long in bed; he could rise earlier. If all the time thus saved were gathered and put toward some new work, he could undertake it gladly.

More than that, whatever one might do with idle time, far more could be accomplished through the use of proper tools suited to life. And beyond even that, it could be achieved by bringing a greater spirit of labour into one's work.

When he reached home and looked at the clock, he found that he had arrived twenty minutes earlier than usual. How had that happened? He tried to recall the walk, but could not remember it at all. Sitting on the bench at the doorway, he took off his kurta and vest, laid them aside, and, without even washing his hands and feet, lay flat on his back. Folding his arms across his chest, he closed his eyes and began to think.

Sumitra was returning from the garden, carrying freshly dug arum roots in one hand and a hoe in the other. Catching sight of Bachelal from the path, she quietly entered the courtyard. At once she understood inwardly that he had fallen into that very state in which a man, after being thrown from a bicycle, lies flat upon the road as though his limbs were broken.

But from behind the courtyard screen, when Ruma saw Bachelal, she began to wonder: on other days, after returning from school, he would go straight to his room and remove his clothes there. Why had he done differently today? Something must have happened on the way.

Agitated, Ruma hurried out into the courtyard, went up to Bachelal, and asked, 'Is something wrong?'

Opening his eyes, Bachelal looked at her and then closed them again. A chill of fear passed through Ruma's heart. Leaning closer, she asked again, 'Are you unwell in body or in mind?'

Opening his eyes once more, Bachelal said in a low but steady voice, 'No, nothing is wrong. Go away for now. The waves of the sea are rising in my mind.'

Alarmed, Ruma went into the courtyard to tell her mother-in-law. Her sari had slipped from her head. Going up to Sumitra, she said, 'Leave the arum for now. Your son's mind is disturbed. He is neither speaking properly nor at ease. Even the colour of his face seems to be changing. Please come quickly and see what has happened to him.'

Holding the arum in both hands and setting it down beside the knife, Sumitra looked at Ruma and said, 'Nothing has happened to the boy. He is simply tired from returning from school.'

In a fluster, Ruma replied, 'No, Mother. He returns from school every day, but today he has come back like this, on foot and in such a state. Has he ever been like this before? How well he used to seem on other days!'

Taking Sumitra by the arm, Ruma almost dragged her towards the verandah. As soon as they reached the doorway, Sumitra said, 'You go quickly and make some tea. I shall call Achhelal.'

Ruma went to prepare the tea, and Sumitra went to call

Achhelal. He was snapping dry stalks for fuel, and as he broke one, his finger split open. Blood began to flow. By then, Sumitra had reached him.

Seeing the blood, she told Makhni to bring a strip of cloth. Makhni came running with it. Taking the cloth, Sumitra wound it tightly around Achhelal's finger, and the bleeding stopped. Makhni gathered the broken sticks and carried them to the hearth. Sumitra then brought Achhelal with her to where Bachelal was sitting.

By then, Ruma had returned with the tea. All of them began to drink. After taking a sip, Bachelal asked Achhelal, 'Uncle, why have you wrapped a cloth around your finger?'

He replied, 'Just now I was breaking dry fuel sticks and got cut. I have no proper tool to cut them, so I was breaking them by hand. The blood began to flow, so they tied this cloth around it.'

As the conversation continued, Ruma's unease grew. Even so, she kept lifting her eyes and glancing at Bachelal.

Then Achhelal said, 'Son, you have placed the burden of farming on me just like that. But how is farming to be done without tools? There is no plough, no hoe, no proper sickle in the house, no hand hoe, no axe, no billhook. Then how much work can be done with bare hands alone? One sees it in the village itself. No one lends anything to anyone, and because of poverty no one possesses everything he needs. Then how is the work to go on?'

Hearing this, it occurred to Bachelal that just as his own time was being wasted for want of a bicycle, so too Achhelal's time was being wasted for want of tools.

Smiling, Sumitra said, 'Son, just as society helps a family to move forward, so it also holds it back. In words, everyone speaks of good things, but in practice, the opposite is often true.

At present, first find the means to reach the point where you now wish to stand. It may not yet be clear to you, but you are still far below it. First understand the paths along which you have fallen behind even your present limit, and make up those deficiencies. Only when you stand firmly at today's boundary will your step be able to move forward. If you try to advance in a one-sided way, you will stumble somewhere or other.'

Hearing Sumitra's words, a small flame of hope began to flicker in Bachelal's mind. A faint light spread through his heart. Smiling, he said, 'Mother, your words have taken root within me. At present, there are four of us fit for work: Uncle Achhelal and his wife, and the two of us. You have grown old now. While I was at school, it occurred to me that since I walk four kos each day to and fro, if I buy a bicycle, half that time can be saved. The time thus spared can be put to the work ahead. Unless we try to move forward, how shall we ever do so?'

Nodding, Sumitra said, 'Son, for now you must hold to two paths. You have your service, so keep that steady; and you have two bighas of land, so bring that to life as well. If both begin to run properly, you will see the household rise without cause for complaint. Achhelal has spoken wisely. Until you have the proper tools for farming, how will you ever compete?'

Sumitra had not yet finished speaking when Achhelal broke in: 'Bhouji, yesterday evening Jugai came and sat at the threshold. I was in the courtyard mending the broken string of a cot. After a while, I got up to spit and saw him sitting there. At once, I went around through the courtyard, took tobacco and lime from the shelf, mixed them, and went to the doorway. Seeing his drawn face, I asked, "Brother, where have you come from? You look greatly troubled."

The poor fellow could hardly bring himself to speak. I offered him tobacco and took some myself. Once it had gone into his mouth, it was as though speech returned to him. He said, "Brother Achhelal, I scarcely have the courage to say this, yet you are no stranger, so I will speak. You can see for yourself how hard the times have become. I had four bighas of land, no more. God gave me three daughters. The eldest was married while Father was still alive. Two remained. For the middle one's marriage, I borrowed money from Soman. I had hoped that the produce from the fields would repay the debt. But you know well enough how the last three years have gone. I could not repay it.

One day, Soman spoke so harshly that my temper rose. It came into my mind that whether any land remained or not, within five days I would repay him. That bitterness stayed with me, and I sold one and a half bighas cheaply and paid him back. Now only two and a half

bighas remain. The youngest girl has grown to fifteen or sixteen, so her marriage too has become necessary. A match has been settled, but without money, how can a date be fixed? Such a curse has taken hold of people these days that it twists and devours everyone.

I am afraid to borrow at interest, so I have come to you, in the hope that you might arrange some money for me."

Jugai's words melted my heart. Yet what is it for a poor man's heart to melt? I myself barely manage to get by, so what help can I offer another? Even so, it came to my mind that Bachelal has a salaried post, so I should speak to him. And what difference is there between a daughter of the community and one's own daughter? Until a girl is married and sent away, she belongs to the whole community; after that, she goes away forever.'

Listening closely to Achhelal's words, Bachelal lowered his head and began to think. I work within society. I earn money, and society, too, places its hopes upon that earning. Even if I do not give the money, the marriage will somehow still take place. But what would that make me? How much resentment would that poor man feel toward me?

So long as a grown daughter remains in her parents' house, their hearts burn little by little. At such a time, help is not merely help; it is the lifting of a great burden from a life. My money lies in the bank, but how much interest will it yield? Whatever it yields, prices will rise by more than that, and the value of the money will shrink. In that case, even the principal will diminish. Better, then, to give the money without interest and be of real help.

As these thoughts took shape in his mind, Bachelal lifted his head and looked toward his mother. Sumitra was already looking at him. The understanding passed silently between them.

Bachelal said, 'Mother, everywhere one looks, there is nothing but want. Unless want itself is removed, how can people move forward? From the individual to the family, and from the family to society, everything seems stuck. How can it move?

Just as water flowing over low ground cannot rise to higher ground, and if an earthen embankment is raised, the difficulty only increases, so it is in life as well. Life cannot move like the wind, indifferent to what is high and what is low.'

Smiling, Sumitra said, 'You have spoken well, son. When water gathers and deepens in low ground, then there is hope that it may rise. To break the embankment that stands as an obstacle, means are required.

Until now, social customs and ways of living have been shaped in such a way that if one step is lifted, another slips; and if the second is lifted, a third gives way. Yet patience and courage are needed by all.

If one stands still and looks, one may indeed see far. But this must be understood carefully: just as the eyes first see what is near and only then what is far, so too a person must first learn to see himself. Once he has done so, the path to seeing the world will appear. And the moment he begins to walk that path, leaving aside pretence and hesitation, his feet will touch the real earth.

At this moment, three tasks stand before you. First, buy a bicycle, so that your body is spared and your time saved. Second, obtain all the necessary implements for farming.'

Hearing his mother's words, Bachelal turned to Achhelal and said,

'Uncle, tomorrow is Saturday. Since things have been lacking for so long, let them remain so for one day more. And since I have gone to school on foot all these days, I can do so for one day more. The day after tomorrow is Sunday, and there will be a holiday. We shall eat early in the morning and go to the market. We shall buy a bicycle and all the tools needed for farming. And we shall help Jugai with his daughter's marriage.

All the money lying in the bank shall be withdrawn and put to use, from the family outward into society. If only one family moves ahead, society will not move. For society to advance, every family must advance. Just as an engine draws long carriages by joining them to its own motion, so too, if society is set upon the track and drawn forward, it will move with the same force.'

Hearing Bachelal's thoughts, Sumitra said, 'Son, you will certainly buy the bicycle. But you will use it only for going to school and returning. After that, it will lie idle at home. So if anyone in the village ever needs a bicycle, let him use it as well. Your work will continue, and so will another's.

In earlier days, people would dig ponds so that not only their own needs might be met, but those of society too. Until love grows within society, until people recognise one another as human and help one another, society will continue to stagger. But when everyone stands ready, offering both physical labour and material means for the good of all, then society will surely move forward, and all will benefit.

Do give Jugai money for his daughter's marriage. And if he wishes to offer his field in pledge, tell him instead to cultivate it on share. The poor man will be spared the burden of interest, and the land will still yield produce. He too has a family. He too must eat.'

That evening, Jugai came to Achhelal's house. Achhelal had just finished his work and was about to go towards the pond when his eyes fell upon him. The moment he saw him, he said, 'Brother Jugai, your matter is settled now. From the moment you spoke of it, it has been on my mind. But one must find the right time to speak. When the moment came, I told Bachelal, and he agreed at once. He will arrange the money for you. So you may set your mind at ease and fix the date of the marriage.'

Hearing this, Jugai said, 'Brother, there is still no lack of good people in this world. Whoever stands by another in his time of need, by him God too will stand when his own time comes. I did not speak to Bachelal directly, so come with me now, and I will speak to him in your presence.'

Achhelal replied, 'There is no need for that now. It will be better if, the day after tomorrow, on Sunday, we all go to the market together. On the way, we can discuss everything.'

Hearing Achhelal's words, Jugai nodded and said, 'That would be very good, brother.' ❑

6

☰

The arrival of Devan brought immense joy to Dinma and Bhukhni. In Bhukhni's heart grew the belief that God had sent them a son who would one day provide for them. An old memory then stirred within her. Dukhni had been born a day before her, and from childhood the two had lived and played together. As they grew older, they gathered leaves, carried and spread cow dung, and shaped dung cakes side by side. They cut grass, grazed goats, and played childish games by the watchman's hut in the embankment fields. During the month of khesari, they would sneak salt from the courtyard and mix it with the grain to eat. When mangoes began to form, they plucked and ate them, rubbing them with a little lime wrapped in leaves to soften their sourness.

As they matured, they began working alongside their mothers, cutting paddy and wheat, gathering stalks, and sowing khesari and lentils. In time, they even took on transplanting paddy and mandua. Dukhni was married five years before Bhukhni and went to live in her husband's home, while Bhukhni remained unmarried. Dukhni's son had already grown, while Bhukhni's was still an infant. But now Bhukhni felt that God had finally understood her sorrow. Without her asking, He had given them a son who would one day earn.

Dinma felt as though a strong arm had come to support him. Together, they would now prepare the fields and transplant paddy and mandua. One more worker meant more labour accomplished. Even if an employer hesitated to burden Devan, thinking him a boy from a respectable household, Dinma would find a way to secure work for him. Even if it meant taking on extra strain himself, it would still add

another earning hand. There were now three who could work. With this, their hardships would surely lessen. They had endured suffering for as long as it had been written in their fate, and now, at last, better days seemed near.

Devan began to observe closely how Dinma and Bhukhni endured the cold months of Poush and Magh. There was no proper quilt in the house, not even a single blanket. They wrapped themselves in torn saris and worn dhotis. Old rags and scraps of cloth had been stitched into a rough quilt, which served as their only covering. On colder days, they lay on paddy straw, using it for both bedding and warmth. Their home consisted of a single room, no more than seven cubits long, where they lived as best they could. In that space, they cooked, stored their belongings, and slept. One corner held the hearth, another the bedding, while in the middle they kept a small fire of dried cow-dung cakes. Though this offered some warmth, the hut's mat walls were poorly sealed, and the cold seeped in from every side, chilling the room like water. At night, until the cooking was done, Dinma would sit by the fire with the children, trying to keep warm.

One day, at dawn, a cold west wind began to blow. Both of Dinma's legs, below the knees, lay uncovered. The icy air left them stiff and numb. He woke with a start and felt the urge to get up, but the moment he tried to rise, his legs would not straighten. Sitting up, he ran his hands over them. Above the knees, he could still feel sensation, but below them there was nothing. Silently, he wondered how this had happened. If his legs became useless, how would he ever walk again? Fear made his chest throb. He woke his wife.

Lifting her face from the covering, Bhukhni said, "It is bitterly cold. Cover your face and lie still."

With that, she pulled the covering back over herself. Seeing this, Dinma cried out,

"I think a snake may have bitten my legs. They feel numb."

At the mention of a snake, Bhukhni started up in alarm. She rose, took the bamboo sieve from near the hearth, touched it to his legs, and asked, "Can you feel this?"

Dinma replied, "I can see it touching me, but I feel nothing."

Setting the sieve aside, Bhukhni began pinching his skin. "What about this?" she asked.

"I feel nothing at all," he answered.

Anxiously, she leaned closer. "Did you hear any rustling in the night?"

In a weary, troubled voice, Dinma said, "How would I know? I was asleep. Only when I woke and tried to rise did I realize it."

A thought rose in Bhukhni's heart: O God, why send such sorrow in times like these? If misfortune had to come, it might at least have come by day. In the middle of the night, what can I do? How will we endure this?

Seeing her wringing her hands, Dinma said, "Light the fire. The west wind is blowing. Perhaps the cold has struck me."

Devan, lying on his bedding, had been listening to everything. Bhukhni pulled a live ember from the hearth and tried to kindle the fire. But the fuel was damp and chilled, and the fire would not catch. Smoke rose thickly, with little flame. Choked by it, Devan began coughing and sat up. Soon the room filled with smoke, and nothing could be seen clearly.

"Aunt, put some bedding straw into the fire," Devan said.

Feeling her way through the smoke, Bhukhni grabbed a handful of straw and threw it onto the embers. But the smoke made her cough so violently that she could hardly blow on the fire. Anger rose in Dinma. He felt he might have struck her in frustration if he had been able to stand. This woman knows nothing, he thought. But then he checked himself. One hardship was burden enough; there was no need to add another. He remained silent.

At last, the fire caught. The smoke thinned and drifted away. Once the flames steadied, Bhukhni poured mustard oil into her palms from a small bottle. Warming it again and again over the fire, she began rubbing it into Dinma's knees. After a while, the stiffness began to ease. As the joints loosened, Dinma bent his legs and felt them with his hands. Then he said,

"Mix a little lamp oil with the mustard oil and rub it into the soles of my feet."

Bhukhni mixed the two oils and began rubbing his soles. As

she worked, the numb tingling gradually faded. As soon as his body felt lighter, Dinma rose and stepped outside. When he returned, he said to Bhukhni, “The comfort of winter belongs to the rich. For the poor, the cold feels like a punishment from God.”

Spring arrived. The next day was Saraswati Puja, when farmers would take up the plough. The weather had begun to warm, and the short days were slowly lengthening. Many ploughmen, hoping for better terms, had already shifted to new landholders. Several farmers approached Dinma and asked him to take up their plough, but he refused. Once a ploughman yoked himself to a farmer on Vasant Panchami, he was bound to serve that farmer for the entire year. Dinma had no desire for such bondage. A free field hand worked with independence, choosing where to labour and from whom to accept wages.

Until then, the village custom had been to give a ploughman five kattas of land on share in exchange for a year’s work. But this year, many men had migrated to Punjab and Delhi, raising the value of labour. The remaining ploughmen gathered and agreed to demand five kilos of grain as wages; otherwise, they would refuse to plough. They also resolved to give only one-third of the sharecropped produce instead of half. If the farmers accepted these terms, so be it. If not, each farmer could till his own land.

For ten years, Bhutkumra had ploughed Radhakant’s land. This year, however, he gave notice three days before the ceremonial start of ploughing. On the eve of the festival, Radhakant came to him and asked him to take up the plough again. Bhutkumra refused. “Master, I will take five kilos as my wage,” he said. “All the ploughmen have agreed. If you pay that, I will work. Otherwise, I will not.”

At this, Radhakant’s eyes reddened, though he held himself in check. “If all the farmers pay five kilos, then I will as well. But why should I alone agree if others do not?”

Bhutkumra answered firmly, “Let others do as they please. I will take no less than five kilos. Without it, I will not plough.”

At these words, Radhakant flared with anger. “If all landlords pay five kilos, then I will. If they do not, neither will I. But tomorrow is the festival. You will yoke the plough.”

Bhutkumra immediately sensed the trap. Once he took up the plough, he would be bound, and afterward they would compel him to continue under the old terms. It was better to settle the matter now, clearly and without evasion. He said firmly, "Whether anyone else agrees or not, I will not yoke the plough without five kilos."

Hearing the resolve in his voice, Radhakant stiffened. "Whatever others may do, you will work at the old rate. If not, there will be consequences."

Just as sharply, Bhutkumra replied, "Let the sun rise in the west if it must, but I will not go back on my word."

Changing his tone, Radhakant said, "If you will not plough, then repay your debt. Your house stands there, mine here. Until you clear what you owe, I will hold you to it and make you work."

Bhutkumra answered, "I have seen many men eager to seize another by the wrist. If you have the courage, then try it. This is a man's wrist, not a woman's."

Radhakant said, "Very well. If you do not wish to yoke the plough, then do not. But you will still repay my debt. Come to my house and settle what is written in the ledger."

At this, Bhutkumra thought that if he went there and the whole household turned on him, he might be beaten for nothing. After considering it, he said, "Bring the ledger here. Whatever is due, I will pay it here."

Radhakant, in turn, thought that if he brought the ledger and Bhutkumra snatched it away or tore out the marked page, everything would be lost.

Their quarrel was still ongoing when Bhutkumra's son, Guletiya, returned from Punjab. Three years earlier, he had gone to Delhi with some men from his maternal village. But he found no work there. After wandering for fifteen days without success, he left for Punjab. On the train, he met a young Punjabi Sikh who was studying in Delhi, and with him he went on to Punjab. The Sikh's father was a prosperous farmer with fertile land and many cattle, and Guletiya stayed with them.

When he had left home, he had told no one, and so, to everyone in the village, he had simply vanished. Rumours spread quickly. One

said he had been crushed under a train. Another claimed he had been caught stealing and was in jail. Some said he had gone to Arabia. Others believed he had been cheated and sold by a broker. A few thought he had joined criminals or become a pickpocket. No one knew the truth.

As such stories circulated among those returning from Delhi, they reached the village in many exaggerated forms. Hearing these tales, Bhutkumra and his wife were overcome with grief. When a year passed without any letter or money from him, they forced themselves to accept his loss.

In the evenings, the Sikh with whom Guletiya lived would speak of his life, his fields, and his family. Listening quietly, Guletiya resolved that he would not return home merely to work as a labourer, nor send small sums of money. He would go back only when he had earned enough to establish something of his own. And so he did.

When Guletiya finally returned, Bhutkumra did not recognize him. He wore a Punjabi kurta and pyjama, a steel bracelet on his wrist, and had grown his hair and beard long. As soon as he reached the doorway, he set down his bag and attaché case and bent to touch his father's feet. Bhutkumra placed his hand on his head in blessing, still unaware of who he was. For a moment, a thought flickered, perhaps this was Guletiya, but it quickly faded. Guletiya was dead, he told himself. Radhakant, however, recognized him at once and quietly slipped away.

By then, Guletiya's mother had also come out from the courtyard, her face veiled, and stood beneath the eaves. All the while, Guletiya stood smiling, yet silent. The children of the hamlet began shouting, "The hing (asafetida) seller has come, the hing seller has come!" Hearing their cries, more children gathered. After a moment, half-stunned and half-awed, Bhutkumra asked, "Son, I feel I know you, yet I do not. Tell me plainly, who are you?"

Smiling, Guletiya said, "It is I, Guletiya."

At the sound of his name, Bhutkumra stood utterly speechless. Tears streamed down his face. His mother rushed forward, clasped him in her arms, and drew him to her breast. It felt as though, in Bhutkumra's house, a storm had broken, lightning had struck, and the earth itself had trembled. Guletiya had not returned with money

alone. He brought with him skill, resolve, a spirit of hard work, and the determination to lift his family's burdens.

Radhakant went straight home. For a moment, he thought, Today I have been disgraced. But another voice within him answered, I still have my standing and my wealth, so how have I been disgraced? It would be disgrace only if I had to weigh out five kilos for him with my own hands. At this thought, he smiled. Bhutkumra was burdened with debt. Not only was he trapped in borrowing, but his entire life moved along the path of debt. How long could one who lived in water remain at odds with the crocodile?

Compared with previous years, Dinma prepared twice as much land this year. From Saraswati Puja onward, he worked the fields continuously until Janaki Navami in Baisakh. He would have continued longer, but without proper rain, the soil hardened, forcing him to stop. The heat came early that year, already harsh in Baisakh.

A short distance from Dinma's house, in the middle of the embankment, stood a large, spreading mango tree. Every year, he endured the fierce sun of Baisakh and Jeth beneath its shade. When the monsoon began, heavy rain would fall, drumming steadily upon the land. Dinma took deep pleasure in those moments on the embankment. And as he sat there, a thought came to him: people accuse God of injustice without reason. If God were truly unjust, why would He grant such joy to the poor?

Sitting alone, Devan reflected: a full year has passed. I will not stay here any longer. If I remain in one place forever, how will I ever see the world?

Without telling anyone, Devan left Nawtol and went away. ❑

7

Crossing beyond Nawtol, Devan walked along the road, wondering what the next village might be like. Two kinds of thoughts took hold of his mind. The first was that what lay ahead might be better; the second, that it might be worse. Then another thought arose: even "better" could mean different things. One kind of goodness lay in serving the body, the other in serving the soul, intellect, and conscience. It also occurred to him that the soul was of the nature of light, and so could not exist without it.

In the same way, evil too had many forms, shaped by caste, religion, and wealth. In a village where the upper caste held power, life became harsh for the lower castes; where the lower castes dominated, it could become harsh for the upper. The same was true in matters of religion and wealth. The more Devan tried to think, the more entangled his thoughts became. As oppressive heat unsettles the mind, so it was with him. He lost awareness of the road. Everything behind him faded, and what lay ahead seemed closed off.

At last, Devan sat down. No thoughts came to him. It was autumn, and in the warmth of the sun, sleep overtook him. With his mind emptied, his body felt light, and sleep entered easily. There, by the roadside, Devan fell asleep.

His awareness was still present, though childlike. As the sun's warmth touched him like a mother's lap, the stiffness left his body. Yet it was a child's sleep, half-aware. It seemed as though a voice spoke within him: "Traveller, will the road shorten itself while you sleep? Will you see the world this way? You lie in an embanked field

where snake-holes run along every ridge. Rise quickly and take to the road, or a snake may strike. If you remain here, you will be lost."

Devan sat up. Lifting his eyes, he looked around, but his vision was blurred with sleep. Rubbing his eyes, he cleared the grit from their corners. Once his sight steadied, he rose and continued on.

A little farther ahead, a village came into view. From a distance, he tried to judge whether it was large or small, but as he drew nearer, the brightness confused him, and he could not tell. To the south, he saw a large house gleaming, with tall palm trees rising beside it. Fixing his gaze there for a moment, he then turned northward. There, in the open, beneath scattered trees, people had made dwellings by bending mats into huts, ten or twelve hands long and four or five hands wide. Here and there stood date palms; elsewhere grew creepers, lemon trees, and pomegranate trees. Devan walked on, observing everything closely.

He entered the village. As soon as he stepped in, he saw a woman on the right side of the road, bustling about in agitation. She was saying to her five-year-old son, "Will you go to school or not?"

The boy, sobbing, replied, "I would rather die than go. The master beats us with a cane longer than himself."

Ignoring his protest, the mother coaxed him, "My son, if you do not study, you will never be married."

"Then let there be no marriage," the boy answered.

Devan listened carefully to their exchange and reflected on it. After a moment, he stepped off the road and made his way toward her courtyard. As he reached the threshold, the woman asked, "Son, where are you from?"

With easy familiarity, Devan replied, "I have no village or home. I stay wherever my heart finds rest."

The woman fell into thought. He says he has no village or home. Would such a young boy lie? Surely he must have parents. Then another thought came to her: people, too, often live like wandering creatures. From his manner and speech, he seemed like an orphan. He had little to eat and barely enough clothing. So she asked again, "Where are your mother and father?"

Without hesitation, Devan answered, "Both are dead. I am

alone."

Hearing this, she said, "Will you stay here?"

Smiling, Devan replied, "Yes, I will stay. But whenever I wish, I will leave."

At this, the woman thought inwardly, I too am alone. I too need a man in the house. If he were a little stronger, he could help in the fields. Even so, he is still a male. Then she said, "Stay here, then."

Devan agreed. Seeing this, she asked, "Did you eat anything last night?"

Devan replied, "Yes, I ate. I am not hungry now."

Just as a goat may strip a flowering plant bare, leaving only branches and a single bud that blooms again with time, hope began to rise in the woman's heart. She brought out some bedding and asked Devan to sit. He sat down, and the child came and sat beside him. The woman returned to her work in the courtyard.

After a while, Devan asked the child, "Tell me your name, and your father's."

The child replied, "My name is Ramua, and my mother's is Budhni. My father is dead."

Hearing this, Devan felt the boy was not one to speak idly. He could not be lying.

After cleaning the utensils, arranging the fuel by the hearth, and filling water, Budhni came and sat near Devan. As soon as she sat down, he asked, "Where is your husband?"

At the mention of her husband, Budhni's eyes filled with tears. Grief stifled her voice. Both fell silent. Neither Devan nor Budhni spoke. Yet their eyes, wandering restlessly, gradually met and came to rest. After a moment, Budhni began to speak:

"Son, it was the year before last. Now there is not a single grown man in the house. I am alone. The buffalo we kept was in heat. She was a fine milker. We drank some of the milk and sold the rest. A little money would always come in. The villagers kept a breeding bull together, and I too had given five rupees for it. It was a gentle animal. When the buffalo came into heat, the bull was brought to her, and they were kept together.

"By evening, darkness had fallen. It was the dark fortnight, so night came quickly. In that darkness, a stray bull entered the shed, and the two bulls began to fight. Ramua's father took up a stout stick to drive it away. But the bull turned on him and charged, goring him with its horns. I cried out, 'Run, all of you, run! The bull has killed Ramua's father!' But by the time people gathered, he had been crushed. The bones in his chest were shattered.

"It was night. What could I do? I spent the whole night tending him. There was no doctor in the village. At times he groaned; at times he lay still as if lifeless. I thought his breath had stopped. I did what I could, but my tears would not stop. Even my sari was soaked. By morning, we carried him on a cot to Doctor Shribabu. After examining him, the doctor said, 'He will not recover. As long as he lives, he will suffer. Take him home and care for him there.' Hearing this, I lost all sense and fell to the ground.

"When I came to sense, I knew he would not live more than a few days. We had only one small child. Still, my heart would not accept it. People said, 'He will recover. There are famous healers and shamans. The exorcist from Brahmotra can cure even the worst afflictions.' So I sent for him. He came, performed rituals, spoke spells, and promised recovery. Five hundred, seven hundred rupees were spent, but nothing changed.

"I went to every healer and midwife in the surrounding villages. There was nothing but expense, and no cure. On the seventh day, he died. I do not know how to manage the fields or care for livestock. The buffalo is gone. The trees and bamboo have been used up. Only fifteen kathas of land remain. I cannot see how life will go on."

Hearing her, Devan began to think: I too am only a child. Yet Budhni is not alone in this village. Others have land as well. I can learn from them. Why should I worry? Society is like an ocean; with the help of others, one may still cross it.

As these thoughts came to him, a faint smile appeared on his face. He rose and went out to look around the garden, while Budhni lit the hearth and began to cook. After a while, he returned and sat near the hearth. When the meal was ready, Budhni served him food.

As he ate, Devan said, "From now on, I will call you Didi, elder

sister, and Ramua I will call 'child.'"

Budhni smiled and replied, "And I will call you son."

Thus, a bond was formed among the three of them.

After the meal, Devan said to Budhni, "Didi, this evening, show me all the land you have."

Later that day, Budhni took him to the fields. There were fifteen kathas in all, divided into three plots. After looking over them, they returned to the courtyard. Once back, Devan said, "Didi, I know how to prepare a field. Do you have a hoe?"

Budhni brought out a worn, blunt hoe. Devan took it, examined it closely, and set it down. He decided that at dawn he would sharpen it on the grinding stone. With that single tool, they would take turns working.

At daybreak, Devan sharpened the hoe while Budhni prepared the morning meal. After the three had eaten, they went to the fields. Devan began digging, breaking the clods as he worked. After a while, he grew tired, and Budhni took the hoe. She worked in the same way until she too tired. Then Devan resumed. Together, they dug and loosened ten or twelve dhurs of land before returning home.

On the way back, Devan said, "Didi, we will manage the plough's work with the hoe. When the rains come, we will sow the seeds as well."

Hearing this, Budhni felt a quiet hope. Somehow, they would manage the farming. Once the land was prepared, even a partial yield would help. If not enough for the whole year, it might still sustain them for several months.

When they reached home, Budhni poured water over their feet, spread bedding in the shade, and asked Devan to rest. She then returned to preparing the meal. Day after day, they worked the fields. Within a month, they had prepared all the land. It was the month of Jeth. The heat had grown intense. Leaves had begun to yellow and fall. Water in wells and ponds was drying up or sinking deeper into the earth.

That year, after a gap of three years, the mango trees bore fruit. Devan took Ramua along to gather fallen mangoes and wandered through the orchards. Seeing them, he asked, "Didi, do you not have

any mango trees of your own?"

At this, Budhni's eyes filled with tears. The loss of fruit-bearing trees is like losing a son who earns, a standing crop to fire, or the calf of a milch cow. With a heavy heart, she said, "Son, we once had mango trees, but when misfortune came, we had to sell them."

Hearing this, Devan felt a sharp pang but said nothing. He thought to himself that so many mangoes had ripened in the village that even after people had eaten their fill, much would still remain. Those with plenty would sell the rest.

Then Devan said, "Who has the largest mango orchard?"

Budhni replied, "Nasivalal Kaka does."

"Then this evening," Devan said, "we will go to him and ask to buy the fruit from two trees. We will eat what we need, and sell the rest to pay him."

Through sheer hard work, Nasivalal Kaka amassed considerable wealth in life. He was only about a year old when his father died, leaving him alone with his mother. The love for her young child shook the mother's heart. The poor woman left her husband's home and returned to her parents' house. Seeing her daughter's condition, her own mother became nearly distraught. Inwardly, she would rail against God, questioning how He could be so harsh as to burden her daughter–still of an age to eat and play–with such overwhelming hardship. Yet her husband's words would echo in her mind: "Just as this daughter was born into our home and we have cared for her, so too shall we continue to care for her as long as we live." Even so, her heart remained troubled.

Nasivalal was raised under the care of his maternal grandparents. Like iron shaped in fire and hammered into usefulness, his life was forged through hardship. From childhood, under his grandfather's guidance, he learned the value of work. As he grew into youth, his grandparents passed away. Through perseverance and dedication, he sustained himself, eventually acquiring land. With the income from farming, he bought cows, built a house, planted an orchard, and devoted himself entirely to his life's work.

After thirty years of labour, Nasivalal had become the largest landowner in the village. In the time he could spare from farming, he

learned to read and write. He made it a habit to live among people, yet his heart grew so expansive that, even in company, he seemed quietly set apart. Like the sun that remains distinct despite being surrounded by countless stars, so was he.

One day, Devan arrived at Nasivalal's house. Nasivalal was arranging the creepers of aparajita flowers along a mat wall. Not recognizing the boy, he asked,

"I do not think I know you, son?"

Devan bowed and touched his feet in greeting. "Uncle, I now live in this very village. I have no home of my own."

Startled, Nasivalal asked, "Where do you live in this village?"

"At Budhni's place. The poor woman has only a small boy of four or five. There is no one else."

"Why have you come here?" Nasivalal asked.

"It is the season of mangoes," Devan replied. "The poor woman does not have even a single mango tree. I thought I might buy the fruit from two of your trees so that we may eat, and sell the rest to repay you."

Looking him over, Nasivalal said, "Come to the outer yard. Let us sit and talk at ease. Where are your father and mother?"

At the mention of his parents, Devan grew somber. "Both are dead. Finding myself alone, I left home to see the world. For a year, I stayed in Nawtol with Dinma and Bhukhni. After that, I came to Vikaspur and now live with Budhni. It was she who told me about you, so I came."

Hearing this, Nasivalal reflected on his own life. His expression grew grave. "Yes, I have many mango trees, and many mangoes as well. If that poor woman has none, come–I will show you an ever-bearing grove. It yields fruit throughout the year, and the mangoes are excellent. Choose whichever trees you like. Take two. You may tend them yourself, and you will have mangoes all year round."

At Nasivalal's words, Devan's heart danced with joy. He seemed to step into a world filled with hope. The two set off to see the grove. Upon reaching it, Devan felt as though he had entered a land overflowing with mangoes. The grove stretched long and wide,

with medium-sized trees standing among towering ones. As beautiful as the trees themselves was the abundance of fruit hanging thick upon their branches.

There was a sense of harmony between the trees, as though each made room for the others in quiet affection. The larger trees did not overshadow the smaller ones, nor did the smaller ones seem diminished in their presence. Each tree bore fruit according to its own strength. As Nasivalal stood in the middle of the grove, gazing around with deep attention, Devan too wandered through the orchard, taking it all in.

After some time, Devan returned to Nasivalal and said, "You are truly blessed, Uncle, to have planted such a large and beautiful grove. I had come thinking I would buy the fruit, but since you are offering it so generously, I will serve only as its keeper and take nothing beyond the wage for my labour."

Sensing the eagerness in Devan's heart, Nasivalal replied, "For now, you are still a boy. First, learn how an orchard is planted. Until then, take one tree as it is. Eat the mangoes and plant their seeds. In time, you will raise your own grove. When it begins to bear fruit, you may devote yourself fully to it."

Hearing this, Devan took his leave with a smile. When he reached home, he told Budhni everything. From the very next day, he resolved to gather the fallen mangoes. It occurred to him that he would need a proper sack, but there was none in the house. He thought of asking Didi to stitch one, but for that day, he would manage with a basket.

Taking the basket, Devan set off to collect the fallen fruit. The orchard floor was strewn with mangoes. He quietly thought that, since there was no urgent work at hand, he might gather them all and dry them into sour mango. This would fetch a good price as well. The idea struck him, and he immediately set to work. As soon as the basket was full, he returned home.

"Didi," he said to Budhni, "the orchard is covered with fallen mangoes. You come too, and bring Ramua along. Bring the large tray as well. We will gather them together."

The three of them went to collect the fruit. Seeing so many fallen mangoes, Budhni was astonished. She carried a full tray,

Devan carried the basket, and little Ramua followed with both hands full. Together, they returned to the courtyard.

Once back, Devan said, "Didi, you attend to the household work. I will sort the mangoes."

Devan began sorting while Budhni went to cook. Within fifteen days, the courtyard was covered with heaps of drying mango, spread out like paddy and rice laid in the sun. Gradually, the dried mango filled two entire bins.

At the end of Jeth, a heavy, drumming rain arrived. The heat of the earth and the coolness of the water seemed to wrestle before settling into each other's embrace. The memory of the previous year returned to Devan, and he realized that the time for sowing had come. Yet he was unsure which seeds to plant.

Near Budhni's house lived Sajan, a farmer. It occurred to Devan that, since Sajan was an experienced cultivator, it would be wise to consult him. So he went to Sajan's house. Finding him there, he saw Sajan taking out the plough implements from storage and cleaning them at the threshold.

Seeing Devan, Sajan asked, "Son, what brings you here?"

Devan replied, "I came to ask what seeds should be sown now that the rains have come."

Sajan said, "Son, I do farm and know the work well, but I am not educated, so I do not keep precise track of the months and seasons. Right now, I am preparing the ploughing gear. This evening, I will go to Nasivalal Kaka's house and ask him. You should come along. Whatever you wish to know, ask him there."

"Very well," said Devan, and took his leave.

As evening approached, Devan went with Sajan to Nasivalal's house. Nasivalal was sitting at the threshold, explaining seed-sowing to his son. Just then, Devan and Sajan arrived.

Seeing them, Nasivalal asked, "What brings you both here?"

Sajan replied, "Kaka, I always do my farming after consulting you. Devan came to me this morning to ask about sowing, but I was busy preparing the plough gear. So I told him we would both come to you in the evening."

Smiling, Nasivalal said, “First, share some tobacco, and then we shall talk.”

With that, he brought out the lime-box and placed it in Sajan’s hand. As Sajan mixed the tobacco, he said, “Such rain has fallen that it has cheered the heart.”

Nasivalal responded warmly, “If it had been only a light shower, it would have remained on the roads and footpaths. But because it was a proper drenching rain, the land has been soaked well. Farmers can now sow their seeds and continue ploughing even the distant fields for ten days. The grasses that had dried have come back to life, and that will increase fodder for the cattle as well.”

Taking a pinch of tobacco, Sajan offered it to Nasivalal. Nasivalal took it in his left palm, rubbed it twice with the thumb of his right hand, inhaled a pinch, and then placed the tobacco in his mouth. As soon as the snuff took effect, he sneezed. When it passed, his mind felt lighter, and he began to speak.

“Jeth is coming to an end. The season has turned out well. In traditional farming, this is the time to sow marua, summer paddy, and agahani seed for the low fields. People can sow almost instinctively. I have a borewell, so I also grow maize and harvest summer paddy. Alongside this, Baisakh vegetables such as sajmain (turnip), ramjhimni (ridgegourd), jhimni (gourd), and leafy greens are still plentiful and will continue for another month. Ramjhimni also grows in the rains. Sajmain, jhimni, greens, and others thrive in the rainy season as well, so they can be planted then too. But the most important point is this: not every household is the same, so each person must decide according to their own circumstances.”

Hearing this, Sajan felt satisfied. But in Devan’s mind, many questions arose at once. He said, “Uncle, my Didi has only fifteen kathas of land, and both of us are complete novices. How are we to manage?”

Nasivalal replied, “For a family of three, that is a substantial amount of land. If it yields well, not only will you meet your needs for the year, but you will also have some surplus.”

At the word surplus, Devan sprang to his feet. Nasivalal gently seated him again and said, “First, put the whole year out of your mind. There are three seasons, and each has its own crops. For now, begin

with summer paddy, marua, and vegetables for the household. Before long, the vegetables will start yielding, and that alone will sustain you. If you grow only enough for yourselves, you will merely consume it. But if you grow more, you will eat and still have produce left to sell."

Devan asked, "Uncle, where will we get the seeds?"

Nasivalal said, "I will provide all the seeds you need."

Devan continued, "My Didi has three plots. One, about four kathas, is low and retains water, while the other two are slightly higher. Please tell me clearly which crops should be grown in each."

After listening carefully, Nasivalal said, "In the low field, you must transplant a variety of paddy that can withstand standing water, since water will collect there. Of the other two plots, use the middle one for summer paddy. There are many varieties, from seventy-day to one hundred and fifty-day crops. If the summer paddy does well, five kathas should yield about seven quintals of grain.

"In the remaining plot, sow marua. It matures quickly. If the rains are plentiful, then after harvesting the marua, plant a quick three-month crop. If the weather turns dry and sunny, sow pulses such as rahar, tebakha, or kurthi (black pulse). Now tell me, do you have a kitchen garden near the house?"

Devan replied, "Yes, there is a small patch. Earlier there were two mango trees there, but they were cut down."

Nasivalal said, "Even if it is only ten dhurs, it can supply vegetables for the household throughout the year. In one part, sow leafy greens. In another, plant ramjhimni. And grow a vine of sajmain."

Devan asked, "Uncle, how much can one vine produce?"

At this, Nasivalal almost laughed. Then, realizing the boy's inexperience, he explained patiently, "My boy, if a sajmain vine is properly tended, it can yield a hundred fruits, and with full care even a hundred and fifty. But it requires constant attention."

Devan asked, "What kind of attention?"

"Just as you would build a house," Nasivalal said, "you must make a strong bamboo trellis for it. Watch for worms and insects. Feed it with ash, manure, and DAP fertilizer. Once the vine takes

root, give it urea and plant tonic. And for good fruiting, add potash as well."

Hearing all this, Devan, feeling himself an inexperienced and struggling cultivator, said, "Uncle, what you say makes sense to me, but at present we lack everything. Keeping our condition in mind, please show me what we should do now."

Nasivalal replied, "My boy, God helps the poor as well. God dwells in the soil, the water, the air, and in many other places. Wherever a crop is first planted, the earth, water, air, and sunlight draw from their own stores and nourish it. You must sow at the right time, care for it, and make whatever small arrangements you can. But begin. The moment you start working, your troubles will begin to fade. The more you do, the more they will leave you."

Hearing Nasivalal's words, Devan burst into laughter. Seeing him laugh, Nasivalal felt a deep sense of joy, like the cooling happiness parents feel during the festival of Jursital (a Maithila festival) when water is sprinkled over their children. He lifted his eyes and looked out at the world. It occurred to him that the world itself was a field of action. Devan would surely grow into a man of action, but the path of action must be guided by knowledge. The experience Nasivalal had gathered over the years would help him guide the boy.

While handing him the seeds, Nasivalal said, "My boy, the seeds for greens and vegetables are measured by estimate, but the paddy and marua seeds have been weighed. There are five kilos of each. Sow each lot in five dhurs of land."

At the mention of "five dhurs," Devan asked, "How am I to understand five dhurs?"

Smiling at his curiosity, Nasivalal replied, "In this village, a measuring rod of six and a half hands is used. One length by one length of that rod makes one dhur. In earlier times, however, people measured one dhur by taking three paces each way."

Devan said, "But not everyone's pace is the same, is it?"

Pleased by the question, Nasivalal said, "You have asked well. A pace should be slightly longer than two hand-lengths. It should be neither too wide nor too short. The distance between the feet should

be about one and a half hands. Since one foot is roughly a span long, and the width of both feet together equals one hand, a proper pace includes one foot's length and about one and a half hands in between."

Hearing this, Devan leapt up, laughed aloud, and even clapped his hands.

Surprised, Nasivalal asked, "My boy, why are you so delighted?"

Devan replied, "Uncle, you have taught me how to measure the earth. Now I feel I can measure the whole world."

Taking the paddy, marua, and vegetable seeds, Devan set off. On the way, Sajan said to him, "My boy, there are people in this village with whom it is difficult even to speak. I usually keep to myself, absorbed in my own work and troubles. Otherwise, one never knows when one might get entangled in something. But now, we are like brothers. We can speak freely and without hesitation."

That evening, while out walking, Sajan came to Budhni's house. Budhni was cooking. There was only a small lamp burning near the hearth, and the courtyard lay in darkness. In that dim courtyard, Devan and Ramua sat counting from one to twenty.

Seeing Sajan, Devan said, "Didi, please place the lamp near the doorway. Then there will be light both inside and outside."

Budhni moved the lamp to the entrance. Seating Sajan, Devan said, "Brother, tell me what kind of people live in this village. I too will be living here now."

Hearing this, Sajan felt that Devan regarded him with trust and closeness.

Taking a pinch of tobacco, Sajan held it out. Nasivalal took it in his left palm, rubbed it with the thumb of his right hand, inhaled sharply, and then placed it in his mouth. As the snuff took effect, he sneezed. Once it passed, his mind felt lighter.

With his mind at ease, Sajan began to speak on his own:

"This happened about five years ago. Joginder's cow had calved. It was a fine first-calving cow, with a beautiful colour and a well-shaped body. Its horns curved neatly, and its muzzle was well-proportioned. From the front, it was so pleasing to look at that one

could not turn away, and from behind it was just as striking. People say to beware of a bull's front and a cow's rear, but this cow's udder was as fine as its face. Though it was a local breed, it looked almost like a Jersey. Its milk was excellent too.

"Joginder cared for it in every way. But since it was its first time calving, it was sensitive during milking and would often startle and pull away. It would neither let the calf suck properly nor allow itself to be milked."

"The next day, Joginder went to consult Nanua. Nanua also kept cattle, but he was a meddlesome man. He advised Joginder to give the cow a certain drink. As soon as it was administered, the cow's condition worsened completely. It stopped eating grass and drinking water. It would not allow anyone to come near, nor would it even look at its calf. It began behaving like a man overcome by drink.

"Joginder and his wife wandered about in a daze, weeping and lamenting. The calf, too, had grown weak and thin. Somehow, they managed to get a little milk from elsewhere and fed it to the calf, but such a small amount could hardly sustain it. Poor Joginder had raised the cow with such hope. He had thought that once it calved, he would drink milk for a few days, sell some, marry off his daughter, and perhaps even buy a heifer if anything remained.

"By the third day, Joginder realized that Nanua had given some harmful concoction in the name of medicine and ruined the cow. Though Joginder restrained himself, his wife began cursing Nanua. Seeing this, Joginder said, 'The cow is already ruined. Do you want us to be beaten as well? Be quiet. Can you not see that Nanua has the strongest kin in the village? Such powerful men stand behind him... Keep silent, or we will be beaten for nothing.'"

"In the middle of the embankment lay a fallow patch of land, about two or two and a half kathas, surrounded by vast fields. On that patch stood a sahor tree. It was not very tall, but it was dense, and people often rested in its shade for short while during the day. One day, lightning struck that tree.

"Hearing of it, Nasivalal Kaka was passing by Joginder's house early in the morning on his way to see the tree. There, he found Joginder and his wife weeping. Hurrying toward them, he asked, 'Why are you both crying?'

“At his question, they began to sob even more bitterly. In the courtyard, their grown daughter moved about restlessly, wiping her tears again and again. Meanwhile, Joginder’s young son said to his sister, ‘Mother had said that when the cow calved, she would give me milk. Why does she not give it now?’

“Hearing this, the sister’s heart melted. Yet what could she do? Gently stroking his face, she said, ‘Little one, I have boiled some potatoes for you. I will mash them. Eat them with bread. Has God gone elsewhere? When there is a cow at our post, you will surely drink milk.’

“From courtyard to threshold, Nasivalal quietly took in the entire scene. Hoping to steady them, he said to Joginder, ‘What will come of crying? Is there any sorrow without a remedy? Stop weeping and tell me what has happened.’

“Joginder, holding Nasivalal’s arm and pointing to the cow and calf, said, ‘Kaka, it has been five days since the cow calved, but there has not been a proper flow of milk. She does not even allow the calf near her udder. We have been borrowing small amounts of milk from others to keep the calf alive. Otherwise, even it would have died.’

“Nasivalal covered his mouth with his hand and remained silent for a moment. Then he asked, ‘What did you do after the calving?’

“Joginder replied, ‘The cow would not let anyone near her udder. So I went to Nanua Bhaiya. He brought some medicine from his house and said, “Make the cow drink this. She will be fine.”’

“After thinking quietly for a moment, Nasivalal said, ‘It will be all right. The milk will return. Do not cry. I am on my way to see the sahor tree at the embankment. After that, you come with me to the doctor.’”

Having said this, Nasivalal Kaka set off toward the embankment. Reaching the fallow patch, he examined the sahor tree. Lightning had split it cleanly in two, and both halves had fallen to either side. The strike had run down the trunk, tearing and splintering it from top to bottom.

A thought came to him. Until now, people had believed that lightning never struck a sahor tree, yet here it was before his eyes.

Sitting beside it, he reflected. After some time, he reasoned that the saying might hold true in a grove where taller trees stood around a smaller sahor. But in an open space, such a strike was certainly possible. Having reached this conclusion, he turned and headed home.

Joginder and his wife were waiting at the threshold. As soon as Joginder saw Nasivalal approaching, he rose and stepped onto the road. Seeing him, Nasivalal said, “Come at once. If we return home first, we will get caught up in other matters.”

Together, they set off for the veterinary doctor. Doctor Kamal had just returned from treating a buffalo. As soon as he saw them, he went to the hand pump, washed his hands and feet, returned, and touched Nasivalal’s feet in greeting. After seating them, he went inside and asked his wife to prepare tea.

Joginder was struck by Doctor Kamal’s manner. Sitting beside Nasivalal, Kamal asked about the problem. Joginder explained everything. Taking medicine from the cupboard and placing it on the table, Kamal said, “I am giving you medicine for three days. The small packet is for the calf. Mix it into a little mash and give it every evening. I have also given two kinds of medicine for the cow. Feed them to her with bread. After two doses, her condition should begin to improve. From tomorrow evening, you may begin milking her. Within three or four days, she should recover. If she does not, come again.”

Joginder then asked, “How much do I owe you?”

Smiling, Kamal replied, “Five rupees.”

After paying, Joginder left with Nasivalal. As soon as they reached home, he gave the medicine to both the cow and the calf. Just as the doctor had said, the cow began to recover. From the third day, she allowed herself to be milked properly. For a full month, the family drank milk. Later, Joginder sold the cow for seven thousand rupees. With that money, he married off his daughter and bought a young heifer.

With his eyes closed, Devan had been listening to Sajan’s story. When Sajan fell silent, Devan opened his eyes and said, “Brother, you have opened even the eyes I had closed.”

Sajan replied, “My boy, everyone has such stories. That is why I avoid going to people’s houses. If you listen too closely to village life, you will begin to think everyone is deceitful. Few speak plainly, and fewer still truly help others. Yet when you ask for advice, people speak so sweetly that you believe them to be your greatest well-wishers. Then they twist matters so cleverly that you are left confused.”

By then, Budhni had finished cooking and came to sit with them. After hearing the story, she said, “Brother, the meal is ready. Please eat before you go.”

Laughing, Sajan replied, “Am I an outsider? This house is as much mine as my own.”

Then, turning to Devan again, he added, “There are many more such stories. I will tell you another day. It has grown late now. You all should eat.” ❑

8

In the middle of the night, Bachelal awoke from his sleep. He coughed twice and remained lying on his bed. Turning from one side to the other, he began to reflect: what, after all, had his life been until now?

His father had passed away when he was only three years old. The burden of the family then fell upon his mother. Somehow, she managed to hold the household together and keep it running. Though a woman, she not only preserved the family but also educated both her son and daughter. She saw him through the matriculation examination and made him a teacher, something many men themselves could not have accomplished.

This raised an important question: should a woman be considered weaker than a man? By no means. To regard a woman as inferior to a man is nothing but folly. It is, however, true that the life women have been made to live until now has weakened them. Because of this, a considerable distance has arisen between men and women. To bridge that distance, time, resources, and labour are undoubtedly required. Yet this does not mean that it cannot be bridged. Just as there is immense strength in men, so too there is in women.

As these thoughts arose in Bachelal's mind, he turned his eyes towards his wife. Observing Ruma's habits and behaviour, it occurred to him that she was not even a quarter as active as a person ought to be. If she would only take charge of the household, then alongside his job he too might devote himself to some service to society. His salary would meet the family's needs, and something

might be done for others as well. But this was not the case.

With this thought, Bachelal lit the torch and looked at the clock hanging on the wall. It was one o'clock in the night. Placing the torch beside his pillow again, he resumed thinking.

That night marked the appearance of the first slender crescent. The moon seemed finer than a small grass-cutting sickle. Yet as the days passed, the moon would grow. Gradually increasing, that very moon, on the night of the full moon, would become vast like the sun and turn night almost into day.

Could the same not happen with a human being? Yet such a cycle did not seem to occur in human life. From the day after the full moon, the moon begins to wane; diminishing gradually, it disappears entirely on the night of the new moon. In the end, where does that moon go? And if it truly goes somewhere, how does it return again the following day?

Does something similar happen with human life? Just as awareness of the world continues to shrink until it becomes confined to the individual, so too strength diminishes until existence itself becomes almost death-like.

Then another question arose in Bachelal's mind. Among all living beings in the world, man is regarded as the highest creature, and not merely in name. In truth, it is so. Of all the creatures in the world, only man possesses discernment. Other qualities are found, in greater or lesser measure, in all beings.

And yet, to this day, man employs discernment far more in speech than in life, scarcely even a fraction of it in actual living. This world is a field of action, and man its worker. But, failing to understand this, most people set discernment aside and occupy themselves instead with appropriating the labour of others and building lives of ease and indulgence for themselves. Because of this, fire continues to burn ceaselessly in the jungle of humankind. That fire will go on blazing until the limits of discernment are strengthened. From the very beginning, as man grew more and more cunning, he continued to push the simple and unawakened among men into the rank of beasts.

By such oppression, roads came into being that drove everyone only downwards. Those who were thrust to the very lowest depths

had no chance even to look ahead, let alone move forward. And how were they to look? The whole world had been overturned. All the roads of life had been overturned. Discernment itself had been overturned. Because of this, not one thing remained untouched: literature, art, culture, religion, philosophy. And if a little of them still survives, it survives only in the way that, when Lakshman was struck by the fatal arrow and Hanuman was sent to fetch the Sanjivani herb, he, being unable to recognise it, was compelled to bring the whole mountain instead.

A question arises: can human welfare ever be achieved unless life is turned in a favourable direction? By no means can it be. And yet man possesses the power to do precisely that, if only he can recognise his strength and put it to use.

As soon as this thought came to him, Bachelal opened the door, stepped out into the courtyard, and began looking up at the sky. A fine, whispering darkness spread everywhere. Coming out from the courtyard onto the path, he stood gazing intently at the road that ran from north to south and from south to north. It was one and the same road, and yet by walking northwards one reached the North Pole, while by walking southwards one came to the South Pole. The road was single, but once the direction changed, the destination changed as well. Was it not the same with the road of life? By going one way, a man lived as a sinner; by turning the other, he became righteous. But then another question arose: should one walk alone, or with the group? When one walked with the group, the order of things changed; when one walked alone, it did not.

As these thoughts gathered within him, Bachelal came back into the house, muttering to himself, and lay down upon the bedding. He himself raised the questions and himself searched for their answers.

Ruma's sleep too had broken, but hearing her husband muttering, she lay still and listened. In his speech she could hear resolve, patience, and ardour.

Just as glass hardens in the blaze of a furnace, so courage began to form within Bachelal. Along with courage, patience too came over him. Things that Ruma had never before heard from her husband's mouth she now began to hear. The question of how the road of life

might be changed shook Bachelal to the core. Without changing the road, it was hard to move forward. Yet changing the road was no easy matter either. This very turmoil kept his mind like muddy water, thick and unsettled. Restless, Bachelal would sometimes lie down and sometimes sit up, but the road itself still refused to appear before him.

Then a story from China came back to him. In a mountainous region there lived a man who had to cross a hill every time he wished to leave his house. One day it occurred to him that if he cut through the hill and made a road, the journey would become easier and time would be saved. So he began cutting into the hill with chisel and hammer.

After a while, another man saw him at work. Looking at the hill being chipped away, he asked, 'How will you ever cut through such a mountain?'

Stopping his work, the man replied, 'Whatever can be cut in one lifetime will at least make things easier. After that, my son will continue. One day the hill will surely be cut through, and a clear road will be made. It will be easier for the generations that come after us.'

Reflecting deeply on this story, Bachelal began shaping a plan for the life ahead. Ruma listened closely to her husband's words. Some things seemed right to her, some wrong, while others did not fit into the bounds of her understanding at all. Quietly, she began to wonder whether some illness had come over him. Yet the muttering of illness rises and falls with the strength of the affliction, and that was not what she observed in him. He spoke in one steady flow.

Then Ruma placed her right hand upon Bachelal's chest to feel the beat of his heart. The moment her hand touched him, Bachelal asked, 'Have you awakened too?'

Hiding her thoughts, Ruma replied, 'My sleep has only just broken. Since when have you been awake?'

In a grave voice, Bachelal said, 'Since midnight. Sleep simply will not come.'

'Why did you not wake me as well?'

'I thought of it,' he replied, 'but then it came to me that until one awakens oneself, how can one awaken another? So I did not wake you.'

Sumitra rose, took up the broom kept near the doorway, and began sweeping her room and then the verandah. As she swept and came near the front of Bachelal's room, it seemed to her that he was softly saying something to Ruma. Leaving off her work, Sumitra stood still and began listening.

Bachelal was saying to Ruma, 'In our family there are two young people. There are two children, and Mother is old. When Father died, both my sister and I were still small. The land we have now is the same as we had then. Mother alone not only brought us up but educated us as well. She taught my sister up to middle school and then arranged her marriage. She had me study up to matriculation and made me a teacher.

In the matter of my marriage, it was I who overruled Mother's judgement. She had wished that I should marry the daughter of a farming household, whereas I chose a bride from a salaried family. I did not understand then what lay ahead or behind. But now I see that I made a mistake.

A marriage is not merely between a boy and a girl. Just as age and suitability are considered in the bride and bridegroom, so too must the family and the wider society be considered. The bond between man and woman is, of course, one process in the creation of life. But beyond that there is another life as well, one that remains connected to the individual, the family, and society.

I married, thinking only of an educated, lively, refined family, but I never once considered its way of life or its place within society. Until now, our household has been that of an ordinary farming family, while yours has belonged, for three generations, to salaried service. The way a salaried family lives and the way a farming family lives are different. Their habits are different; their manner of living is different. When two such distinct ways of life come together, I can now see that Mother's view had been the right one…'

The moment she heard this, Ruma sprang up from the bedding like a struck snake and hissed, 'It was because of poverty that my parents cast me off here. Otherwise, I would have lived grandly in some fine town as an officer's wife. In this village I do not see even a hand's breadth of metalled road, no electricity, not a single proper room, no carriage or conveyance of any kind. Somehow I go on living

here, half suffocated, and yet it is you who feels cheated. Truly, this world is astonishing.'

Hearing Bachelal admit his own mistake with his own lips, it occurred to Sumitra that awareness was at last beginning to awaken in him. Such awakening takes time to come to a man, but once it does, he begins to shape his own path and move forward. Just as the tiny flame of a matchstick, given the right conditions, can grow vast enough to consume not merely one house but a whole village in moments, so it seemed to her now. With this thought in her mind, Sumitra stepped down from the verandah and began sweeping the courtyard.

Meanwhile, hearing Ruma's words still charged with anger, Bachelal caught her by the arm and tried to make her understand.

'Do not lose your temper. Try to understand. Whatever in our life until now has been good or bad, let us set it aside and from this moment walk with awareness.'

At this, Ruma said, 'Yes, now go and pore over books and papers, become an astrologer, count the days and read fate.'

'Yes,' Bachelal replied, 'in life, everyone needs the light of understanding. So long as that light does not enter a person, he may wander anywhere like an ignorant traveller, and there is no saying where he will be lost. Now go and attend to the work of the house and courtyard. I too must go to the market. Uncle Achhelal must be ready by now.'

With that, Bachelal came out of the room and quickly set about his morning routine.

A little while later, Jugai arrived with Achhelal. Sumitra was sweeping the courtyard and the threshold. The moment she saw them, she smiled and said, 'So early in the morning, both of you look so prepared. Did sleep not come to you in the night?'

Achhelal was surprised that Bhouji had somehow understood that he had not slept. Smiling, he said, 'My sleep broke at midnight, Bhouji. Then I remembered that Bachelal had said we must go to the market. From then on, sleep would not come at all. Whenever a little drowsiness came, I would start awake again, thinking it was already dawn. As soon as the crows began to call, I came back from outside

and was mixing my tobacco, and by then Jugai had also arrived. I had told him yesterday that he should come to the market as well. On the way we could talk at leisure and finish the market work too. So the two of us took our tobacco and set off.'

After seating the two men at the front, Sumitra set about preparing tea. By the time Bachelal had dressed in his dhoti and kurta and made himself ready, the tea was ready as well. All of them drank it. Then, having finished, the three men set off for the market.

Once they had crossed the boundary of the village, Achhelal said to Bachelal, 'Son, I am an ignorant man, and you are educated, so how could I understand things as you do? But after listening to Bhouji, my mind has changed. Even now I see her rise early in the morning and set herself at once to her work. She manages everything, and in good time she bathes, eats, and even takes her rest. There is no haste about her, no fretting, no anger or worry in her mind. Whenever one sees her, there is always a smile upon her lips. She does not quarrel with anyone, nor does she speak ill of anyone. In the village, I see women of her own age begin at daybreak with abuse, quarrelling, and constant bickering. After hearing such talk until the mind grows weary, I come to Bhouji and sit, speaking of my sorrows and troubles.'

Hearing this, Bachelal asked, 'Why does that happen? Human beings are not dogs and cats, that they should snarl and fly at one another the moment they meet.'

Drawing his face in slightly, Achhelal replied, 'Son, one sees children crying for food while the men and women of the house remain busy quarrelling. It has always seemed strange to me. But if one asks about it, someone will say, "So-and-so has incited them." That is why I never ask anything. I keep my distance from such people. All the while, I remain absorbed in my own hardships and concerns.'

Hearing Achhelal's words, and noticing the sadness on Jugai's face, Bachelal said to him, 'Jugai, I have money in the bank in the names of both of us, and in the children's names as well. I shall withdraw some of it and help arrange your daughter's marriage, and if anything more is needed later, I shall take care of that too. So cast this worry out of your mind. When people live together, each

person’s burden becomes the concern of all.’

At Bachelal’s words, a smile at once appeared on Jugai’s face. His lost hope returned to him. Just as a man’s road changes at a crossroads, so the course of Jugai’s life too seemed to turn at that very moment. Yet, laying bare his helplessness, he said to Bachelal, ‘Brother, for want of money I do not take my wife to the doctor. For three years the poor woman has gone on bearing her suffering within her own body. She sees no sign of money anywhere, so she quietly wastes away. You can see for yourself that day by day she is growing thinner. Half the work she once did, now even that she cannot manage.

But what am I to do? Because of the expense, I do not even send the children to school. Somehow I drag the days along. I am afraid of debt. In the village itself one sees such hard-hearted moneylenders that they turn one into three and have people’s houses and lands transferred to themselves. As it is, we have a little land left, and by one means or another we manage to survive. If that too goes, then both we and the children will be reduced to begging.

In this very village one sees men who once owned a pair of bullocks. They fell into debt, and all their property was swept away. And Munesar, because of debt, fled the village and settled in Nepal. But I am bound by love for my lineage and forefathers. How can I bear to see another man ploughing the land of my fathers and grandfathers? Even now there remains this one hope: that when I die, I shall at least be cremated in the grafted mango grove planted by my forefathers. Then I shall remain in one place with my ancestors. Life is only for a few days, but death endures much longer.’

Hearing Jugai’s words, waves of hope and despair, of joy and sorrow, rose in Bachelal’s heart. Just as a bird, struck by a hunter’s arrow, flutters down from a tree, so Bachelal’s thoughts descended from the world of imagination into the world of reality. And once they entered that world, his heart began to melt like wax. Looking up at Jugai’s face, he said, ‘Brother, we have nearly reached the market. Let us leave these matters aside for the moment. It is better to remember what must be done there, otherwise something may be forgotten. There is no shortage of time or place for speaking of family matters.’

Achhelal said, 'Son, let us first buy the bicycle, so that you may go to school and return more easily. After that we shall buy what is needed for the farming: the hoe, the hand-hoe, the sickle, the axe, the billhook, the rope, and the rest. That is all that comes to my mind just now.'

As soon as Achhelal fell silent, Jugai burst out in agitation and said, 'Brother, in our whole hamlet there is not even a single proper light, nor a single floor mat. Whenever any large occasion arises, we somehow manage by borrowing bedding, lanterns, and utensils from one courtyard after another. So those things too must be bought.'

Hearing this, Bachelal nodded and said, 'Brother Jugai, you have reminded us of something very important. The thought had been in my own mind as well. But I used to think it would be better if the whole hamlet bought such things together. Yet everyone is not alike. Some are well-off, while others are in hardship. So I remained silent.'

At this, Achhelal smiled and said, 'Son, shared things are of two kinds. One kind is what you have just spoken of. The other is when one person buys them alone and offers them for the use of the community. That is what people call dharma.'

At the mention of dharma, Bachelal grew animated and said, 'True, I have brought money for Jugai's need, but there is still time before the marriage, and I too have money in the bank. So we shall leave that matter for later. For now, let us buy all the things we have just discussed.'

Hearing this, both Achhelal and Jugai felt glad at heart.

As soon as the three of them entered the market, they first went to the cycle shop and bought a bicycle. At the same shop, they also bought two lamps. Pushing the bicycle along, they next went to the ironmonger's. There they bought all the iron tools they needed, put them into a sack, tied it with string, loaded it onto the bicycle carrier, and then went on to the utensil shop.

At the utensil shop, they bought two brass vessels, and from there they went to the mat shop. They bought a floor mat twenty hands long and left it there for the moment. Then they went to the cloth shop and bought, of the same measure, a bed-sheet as well. Once all these things had been purchased, the three men went to the sweetmeat shop and had some refreshments.

Then arose the question of how all these items were to be taken home. The three of them began to consider the matter. At last, Achhelal found a solution. He said,

'I shall carry one vessel on my shoulder, and Jugai can carry the other. The two lamps, one each, we can carry in our hands. Everything else we shall load onto the bicycle, and the three of us can walk along, talking as we go.'

Having found a new direction in life, the minds of all three, Bachelal, Achhelal, and Jugai, seemed to soar. Bachelal felt that at last he had set foot upon the true path. Achhelal felt that until a man possessed the tools with which to work, skill and understanding, though present, remained of little use. But once the implements came into his hands, the pace of work increased, and satisfaction followed. And Jugai felt that the obstacle which had kept both him and his family at a standstill would now begin to move. The sorrows of all these days would begin to fall away from the morrow. It was as though, when a dark night came to an end, everything became visible in the light of day. So it seemed to all three of them.

By the time they reached home, evening had deepened. As soon as he arrived, Achhelal called out to Sumitra, 'Bhouji, bring the lantern.'

Because she was alone, Sumitra had spread her bedding near the eaves between the courtyard and the outer threshold, and had hung the lantern in the corner of the western room. From time to time, she would rise and step out to the road to look for them.

The moment she heard Achhelal's voice, Sumitra took up the lantern and came out to the front. Seeing the new things, she thought to herself that what had been done today ought to have been done long ago. Still, even if late, the work had at last been accomplished.

Setting the lantern down, she at once turned and went into the courtyard, where she said to her daughter-in-law, 'Daughter, the boy has come. Make the tea quickly.'

Then she came back out to the front. Achhelal and Jugai set the vessels and lamps down on the verandah and began unloading the rest of the items from the bicycle. Bachelal took off his kurta and vest, laid them on the bench, slipped his sandals beneath it, tucked up his dhoti, fastened it for work, and began arranging everything one by

one.

By then, Ruma came with the tea. Taking it from her hand, Sumitra gave a cup to each of the three men and asked, 'Son, will you have some water as well?'

Achhelal said, 'No, Bhouji, not just now. If I drink tea at this moment, how will that do? I am overheated. Until I pour two buckets of water over my body, I shall not cool down.'

Standing to one side, Ruma kept looking over the things they had brought, and inwardly it seemed as though she were burning. She thought to herself: the bicycle, yes, that was all very well, but all these other things, and so much money spent for nothing. Outwardly she said nothing, yet inwardly she continued to seethe. In anger, she went into the courtyard, sat by the hearth, and began muttering bitterly under her breath.

After drinking their tea, Achhelal and Jugai arranged all the items neatly in the front room. Then Achhelal said to Jugai, 'Since we have had tea, let us have some tobacco as well.'

Jugai began preparing the tobacco. Achhelal then said to Sumitra, 'Bhouji, what was in the heart has today been fulfilled. In the morning we shall spread out the mat and show it to you. It is very fine indeed. This mat alone will last for many days.'

Sumitra felt quietly pleased within herself. The two men took their tobacco and went away. Bachelal changed his dhoti and came to sit by his mother, speaking of the things they had bought and their prices. Within the same household, delight and bitterness had now begun to contend with one another.

Inwardly, Bachelal kept thinking: when something good happens within a family, why is it that all its members do not feel happy in the same way? It is true that where a person has a particular attachment to a particular thing, his joy may be greater. But that should not give rise to jealousy in another. The things brought today are not private possessions belonging to one person alone. Whoever needs whichever thing will use it. Then from where has this sorrow arisen?

Both mother and son could hear Ruma's voice. Smiling faintly, Sumitra said to Bachelal, 'Son, just as when a wasp stings someone

and the pain makes him writhe, so it is with your wife now. The money you earned has been spent; nothing of hers has been spent. You are content, so why should she feel such pain?'

At Sumitra's words, Bachelal said in a puzzled voice, 'Mother, I too am wondering the same. Why is she so distressed?'

Explaining it to him, Sumitra said, 'Son, that is human nature. It is the very root of much suffering. Whatever a person's nature may be, he believes only that kind of thing to be good, even when it is not. You are tired now. If you feel like bathing, then bathe. If not, at least wash your body and hands. Your mind will feel at ease.'

'I do feel like bathing,' Bachelal said. 'I have been on my feet all day. But now the work is done.'

Sumitra brought a bucket and a lota from the courtyard and gave them to him. Bachelal went to the hand pump to bathe, while in the lantern light Sumitra began examining the hand-hoe and the sickle. Once he had bathed, Bachelal came straight into the courtyard and sat down to eat.

Seeing Bachelal on the verandah, Ruma began once more to mutter loudly and angrily. Listening carefully to what she was saying, Bachelal asked,

'Why has such anger arisen in you? What have you seen that has so inflamed you?'

Hearing this, Ruma burst out, 'When a person loses his wits, he behaves exactly like this.'

Inwardly, Bachelal thought that the more he suppressed his own authority, the more she overstepped her bounds. So, sooner or later, he would have to speak. In an unsteady yet firm voice, he said to Ruma,

'I have heard enough. Be silent. If you go beyond your limits, then understand this clearly: I am a man. The more affection I have shown you, the more you have taken me for weak. Even now, take heed.'

At Bachelal's words, Ruma did fall silent, but her face remained clouded with anger. ❑

9

Half of Ashadh had already passed. After the early rains of Jeth (July month), there had been two further showers. Everyone's seedbeds had been sown. Then came a proper soaking rain. As soon as the water settled, the farmers set off for the fields with hoes in their hands. Some repaired the embankments of their fields, some drained off excess water. Some shaped the ridges and corners, while others hurriedly pulled up paddy seedlings.

Sajan had already taken one load of ploughing gear and the yoke to the field and had returned to fetch the bullocks and the hoe. The moment he entered the courtyard, his wife said to him, 'The flatbreads are ready, so eat your morning meal first. I shall drink some water and then go to pull up the seedlings.'

Sajan washed his hands and feet and sat down to eat, speaking to his wife as he did so:

'We shall get the three-katha plot transplanted. I am going now. I shall plough the field and set the corners and ridges in order. You go and pull up four bundles of seedlings, then come back and cook the meal. The seedlings will still be near the surface, so they will not take long to pull. And the field is already ploughed, so I shall not be delayed either. Once the mud is ready and the seedlings are pulled, the two of us will finish transplanting by evening.'

Having eaten, Sajan yoked the bullocks and set off for the field.

The southern embankment land was high, and most of the village farmers had plots there. As Devan had no ploughing arrangement of his own, he decided to prepare the field with the hoe and went off with Budhni.

Budhni's field lay three plots beyond Sajan's, so Devan and Budhni had to pass along the embankment of his field. Seeing the hoe on Devan's shoulder, Sajan asked, 'Devan, are you too going to transplant this very field?'

'Yes, brother,' Devan replied. 'It is a five-katha plot. We shall finish transplanting it in two or three days.'

Sajan said, 'Go, the two of you, and pull up the seedlings. My field too is only three kathas, so it will be done quickly. Your field is already prepared. I shall give it one more ploughing, and that will be enough to make it muddy. It is the first water of the season, so not a moment should be wasted, but your work will move along as well. Once the mud is ready, you can continue transplanting at ease. The moment a field settles into proper standing water, the fear of it drying up lessens.'

Hearing Sajan's words, Budhni began to think inwardly that they had indeed set out under a good sign. Half the work had already been done. In the time it would take the two of them to pull up the seedlings, half the field would be ready. Meanwhile, the field would be ploughed. The seedlings were light enough, so only the transplanting would remain. With a little effort, they would finish it in two days.

The thought of completing the transplanting made Budhni's heart leap with joy. She began to think that if five kathas of land were properly brought under cultivation, then somehow at least three months' provisions would surely be secured. And how much labour had it really taken for those three months? In much the same way, all fifteen kathas had been brought under cultivation within eight or ten days.

The two of them moved on. Once they had crossed the embankment of Sajan's field, Devan said, 'Didi, a great deal of work has already been taken care of.'

The moment they reached the field, Budhni gathered up her sari and tucked it in, then plunged into pulling up the seedlings. Devan began shaping the corners and edges of the field with the hoe. By the time he had finished three corners, leaving only one where the seedlings still stood, Budhni had already pulled up one full bundle. Then Devan joined her in pulling seedlings. Seeing how easily they

came away, Budhni said, ‘Son, once pulled, the seedlings can last for eight days. If we pull them all up now, then only the transplanting will remain. One whole part of the work will already be done. And if we clear the seedlings entirely, the field will be left empty. Then it can be ploughed as well. Otherwise, later we shall have to keep digging and transplanting side by side.’

Hearing Budhni’s words, Devan said, ‘Yes, you are right, Didi. By the time Sajan Bhaiya has finished puddling his own field, the two of us will have pulled up all our seedlings.’

The two of them continued pulling seedlings and talking as they worked. Seeing that there was much to be done, Sajan began driving the bullocks more briskly. Even as he ploughed, he kept thinking to himself that one person’s work is, in the end, for another. The good I do for someone today will, sooner or later, surely return. And even if a poor man cannot repay it, people still call help given to the poor a righteous deed.

The work, after all, was not so very heavy. This was only the first day of preparing the mud, and the bullocks were not tired in the least. The field was in good condition, and the bullocks too were fresh. I shall give it one proper ploughing now, and then, at the time of levelling, I can plough it once more from edge to edge, and even that will produce fine puddled mud. Besides, the hardened earth has already softened with the rain.

After pulling seedlings for a while, Devan said to Budhni, ‘Didi, you keep pulling seedlings for the moment. I shall go and see how Sajan Bhaiya is doing.’

So saying, Devan went over to Sajan. The moment he saw him, Sajan said, ‘My boy, how much longer will you go on pulling seedlings? I am nearly done here.’

At once Devan turned back to the field and said to Budhni, ‘Didi, pull the seedlings quickly. Sajan Bhaiya is almost finished with the puddling.’

The two of them began working with greater haste. Whenever enough seedlings for three good clumps had been gathered, they tied them into bundles. As she tied them, Budhni said, ‘Son, tell Sajan Bhaiya that just as he is puddling our field for us, so when he is ready to transplant his own fields in a day or two, we shall come and help

him. He has much more land than we do. If the two of us help with his transplanting, his work will move ahead more quickly.'

Having finished puddling his own field, Sajan came to Budhni's plot carrying the yoke and plough. On reaching it, he at once unfastened the yoke and dragged it aside into the next field. Resting the plough, he came over to Devan and said, 'My boy, the seedlings are ready now. Carry all the bundles across the embankment and set them there. The ploughing will not take long.'

Saying this, Sajan sat down and began preparing tobacco. After shifting the seedling bundles aside, Budhni said to him, 'Brother, I have only fifteen kathas of land. If you help us for two days, our work will move ahead quickly. You have more land, that is true, but the two of us will come and help with your transplanting as well.'

Hearing Budhni's words, Sajan felt a fresh surge of enthusiasm. Raising the tobacco to his lips, he said, 'Daughter, even when I have more land, I do not like to bring in hired hands for transplanting. Do you know why? Because the village labourers are such that their whole attention remains fixed on their wages. They say they pull seedlings by counting the bundles, but at the time of transplanting they thrust whole fistfuls into the mud. Whether one is landlord or labourer, should not the thought be that the farming must be done properly? Only when the farming is done properly will the yield be good, and only when the yield is good will everyone's condition improve. But that is what no one seems to care about.'

Budhni said, 'Brother, all kinds of people live in a village. Not all are good, and not all are bad. So each person must live by weighing good and bad for himself. Let others do as they will, but everyone should at least try to improve himself.'

After taking his tobacco, Sajan rose to set the plough going again. He took hold of the plough handle, and had scarcely turned one furrow when he saw, four plots away in the eastern field, someone being soundly thrashed by Fusiaha. At first, the ploughman had not suspected in the least that Fusiaha would come to beat him. But by the time Kisunma was setting the plough, the blows had already begun to fall.

Kisunma was a fiery fellow. Leaving the plough standing, he

seized Fusiaha and threw him down in the field. Then, sitting astride his chest, he rained blows upon his face.

The whole embankment-side burst into uproar. Those pulling seedlings and those ploughing came running and began separating the two men, asking what had happened. By then Navki had abandoned her seedling-pulling and gone racing back towards the house. Reaching the hamlet, she first said to Fusiaha's wife,

'Woman, you sit here in the courtyard, while Kisunma has all but killed your husband.'

Saying this, Navki ran straight to Kisunma's courtyard and told his wife, 'Your husband has been killed.'

'How has he been killed?' asked Kisunma's wife.

'How can I tell you everything? Fusiaha went there with a stick and began striking him all over his body.'

Fusiaha's wife at once set off from the courtyard, cursing Kisunma as she went.

In the same manner, Kisunma's wife too came out of the hamlet, hurling abuse. She had scarcely gone a little way, to the point where there was only a single path leading to the embankment, when the two women met. The moment they saw one another, they began shouting abuse all the louder. As soon as they came close, they fell upon each other. Each seized the other by the hair. Tugging and grappling, they both fell to the ground, yet neither released her hold. Kisunma's wife was underneath and Fusiaha's on top. From below, Kisunma's wife bit the other on the nose. Blood began to stream from Fusiaha's wife. At the sight of blood, she bit Kisunma's wife on the cheek. Her blood too began to flow. Even then, neither was willing to let go.

Navki returned to her own courtyard and set about cooking. The people of the village called her Navki because she had come there only after passing through several husbands' households. The husband she now lived with was her fourth. Navki's first marriage had been at Ratuar, where she bore three children. One day she quarrelled with her husband and returned to her parents' home, leaving the children behind. After a year, she married again at Bisunpur. For Navki it was a second marriage, and for that husband

as well. In Bisunpur she had two children, but she left that house too and ran away. After that she married a third time. There too quarrels arose, and she left and fled. It was in this fourth marriage that Navki now lived. This union took place when she was already forty or forty-five years old. That is why the people of the village called her Navki, the 'new one'.

Both Fusiaha and Kisunma were sharecroppers. Each owned only one bullock and had little land besides. It was the month of Ashadh, and with the rains the fields had filled with water and the seedlings had been raised. As rain had fallen at daybreak, no one had prepared for transplanting. Instead, everyone was ploughing his own land in his own way.

Seeing the water, Fusiaha rose early, took the bullock out, set fodder before it, and then he and his wife went to the fields to pull up seedlings. Kisunma's field too held water. At the time of yoking the plough, Kisunma went to Fusiaha's house to fetch the bullock. Fusiaha was not at home, so the two did not meet. Taking it to be a shared arrangement, Kisunma simply took the bullock away. Reaching home, he yoked it with his own and went to the field to prepare the mud.

After pulling some seedlings, Fusiaha returned home to fetch the plough, only to find that the bullock was gone. Still holding the goad in his hand, he went to Kisunma's house. There was neither bullock nor Kisunma there. Guessing what had happened, he went on to Kisunma's field. There he saw Kisunma ploughing. Without a word, he began striking him with the goad. Before Kisunma could even halt the plough, Fusiaha had already landed seven or eight blows.

Kisunma, a hot-tempered man, threw Fusiaha down into the mud and water and beat him soundly. The other ploughmen nearby came running and separated the two. Even after being parted, both continued to hurl abuse at one another. At last, after much persuasion and calming, the men unharnessed the plough and sent each of them away. Fusiaha took his bullock and went home, while Kisunma left the animal there to graze.

On reaching home, Fusiaha saw his wife sitting in the verandah of the courtyard, her whole body smeared with blood, though the

bleeding from her nose had by then stopped. His wife, in turn, saw Fusiaha with his body covered in mud and bruises. The husband and wife sat there in the verandah, looking at one another in silence. Within himself, Fusiaha resolved that he would never again share a bullock with Kisunma. The arrangement between them was broken for good.

The villagers continued with their farming, but neither Fusiaha transplanted a single dhur of paddy, nor did Kisunma. For how could a plough be worked with only one bullock?

That evening, Sajan came to Budhni's house. Both Budhni and Devan were weary from the day's labour. Budhni lay on a bedding spread in the courtyard, and Devan sat pressing her feet. Seeing Sajan, Devan said, 'Come, brother.'

At his words, Budhni rose quickly, adjusting her sari, and said, 'Come in, brother. We worked hard the whole day, and my body is aching, so I asked Devan to press it.'

Sajan said, 'It was the first day of transplanting, so naturally the body will ache. After two or three days of steady work, the body grows used to it, and the pain lessens.'

Budhni said, 'Brother, I have only a little land, while he has much more. What you puddled for us today, we shall finish transplanting by tomorrow. And if you help us for two more days like this, then all my farming will be done. Once your own fields are finished, the two of us will help with his for as long as it takes. In that way, both our cultivations will be completed quickly.'

'Listen, daughter,' Sajan said, 'if people worked together, everyone's work would become easier. But that is not what happens. You saw for yourself what happened today between Fusiaha and Kisunma.'

At this, Devan interrupted, 'Brother, the story you were telling the other day, the one you said you would continue later, tell it now.'

At Devan's request, Sajan tried to recall it. Then, remembering, he smiled and said, 'Very well, listen.'

Pointing with his hand, Sajan said, 'That is Raviya's house there. You are new here, so I am showing you. Raviya decided that he would plant a mango orchard. There had been trees before, but

they were all old. Several had dried up, and several he had even sold. Only one old tree remained, and that too had grown so aged that one year it would bear fruit and the next it would not. He came to me and asked, “What kinds of mango trees should I plant?”

‘At the thought of mango trees being planted, I was very pleased. I was pleased because if someone in the community had an orchard, there would be more mangoes in the village. He would eat them himself, and others would eat them too. Even my own children would gather the fallen fruit. So I said to him, “Ravi, plant good mango trees, those whose fruit is sweet and full-sized.”’

‘I said, “If you buy saplings in the market, you may be deceived. They may tell you they are giving you grafted trees, and in the end they may turn out to be mere seedlings. So instead, go to the mango sellers and carefully choose large, fine mangoes. Eat the flesh and taste them well. Whatever seems best to you, plant the stone from that. Within fifteen days, a shoot will emerge. People call a mango sprout piphi because the small fleshy part beneath the stone is rubbed on a grinding slab to make a paste called piphi; that is how it gets its name. Keep watch over the sprout, so that goats and such animals do not eat it. If a goat eats a larger plant, it may shoot again from below, but if it eats one of these tender sprouts, it will simply dry up. Once the sprout grows a little, dig it up, trim the taproot below, and plant it again. Within a year it will grow to a cubit and a half or two cubits. Then cut off the top. In three years, it will begin to bear fruit.” Raviya did exactly as I advised.’

Devan was listening intently. Pointing now towards Chhathua’s house, Sajan continued: ‘That is Chhathua’s house there. What he did was this: first he counted Raviya’s mango plants. There were twelve. Then he uprooted twelve wild saplings from his own garden and kept them ready by evening. At night, he pulled up all twelve of Raviya’s plants and replanted them in his own land, and planted his own in Raviya’s place. Raviya was such an innocent man that he understood nothing. Three years later, when the trees began to bear fruit, Raviya grew puzzled. “Not one of these mangoes is of the kind whose stones I planted,” he thought. “How has this happened?”

‘Meanwhile, Chhathua began praising his own mangoes

wherever he went. Raviya too, seeing Chhathua's mangoes, felt that they resembled exactly those from whose stones he had raised his own trees. Yet how could he say such a thing?

'Now Raviya's wife had made a vow at the time of planting the mango trees: "When they bear fruit for the first time, I shall feed Brahmins at the shrine of Barham." So when the mangoes began to ripen, she gathered two full trays of fruit from all the trees, set aside a pot of curd, and had a half-measure of paddy pounded into chura. Taking it as an auspicious occasion, she sent everything on a Friday morning through the family priest.'

By eight in the morning, the priest had bathed, performed his worship, marked his forehead with the three sacred lines, and arrived. In front of the shrine, Raviya set out everything: flattened rice, curd, sugar, pickle, and mangoes. The moment the priest's eye fell upon the mangoes, his face fell, though the sight of the curd and chura restored some composure. Raviya served everything before him. The priest set the mangoes aside, saying that they were sour.

At the word 'sour', both Raviya and his wife were stung with anger, though there was nothing they could do. The labour of four years struck Raviya like a blow to the chest from an unseen thief. After that, Raviya resolved to uproot the entire orchard and plant it anew. He came and asked me. I said, "Go to Nasivalal Kaka. He is a man of sound judgement. Do exactly as he tells you."'

Raviya went to Nasivalal Kaka and first told him the whole story. Then he asked about planting the orchard again. Nasivalal Kaka explained matters to him and asked, 'How much land will you set aside for the orchard?'

Raviya replied, 'I am not a man of much land. I have only five kathas of high ground, and it was there that I planted the orchard before. I shall plant it there again.'

Nasivalal said, 'Very good. Plant six grafted mango trees: one Bombay, one Rohania, one Jardalu, one Maldah, one Faizli, and one Rair. If you plant these, fruit will ripen in succession from mid-Jeth to mid-Sawan. I shall give you all six trees. I shall take no money at all. Plant five seedling mangoes as well, and with them one bel tree, two Indian gooseberry trees, one rose-apple, and two creepers. Taken together, it will make a fine orchard. If you plant only grafted

mangoes, then in times of need, when you require wood for fuel, you will find yourself in difficulty.'

Hearing Nasivalal Kaka's words, Raviya felt greatly pleased. He took the saplings and planted them, and fenced them carefully. Thereafter, he and his wife tended the orchard and kept watch over it. That is the very orchard that stands there now. It has been bearing fruit for two years.

When Sajan finished, Devan said, 'Brother, tell me something more.'

Seeing Devan's eagerness, Sajan burst into laughter like popping maize. Composing himself, he pointed towards Tetara's house and said, 'That is Tetara's house there. Poor fellow, he is very plain-spoken. But in the matter of work, he is tireless. Whether in transplanting paddy or in hoeing, he works with such energy that no one in the village can match him. And his wife is just as capable. She is the daughter of a good family. Though dark in complexion, she is strong and well built, tall and slender. She knows every kind of work, from house and courtyard to field and embankment. She keeps the whole management of the household in her own hands.

'Tetara remains content. Whatever his wife asks him to do, he does. The poor woman is truly the Lakshmi of the house. She keeps four head of cattle and tends them so well that it stirs one's heart to see it. If you go to her cattle-yard, you would feel like sitting there. Never will you see even a trace of dung lying in the stall, nor any dirt or litter. The place shines like silver.

'By rearing cattle, she has bought one and a quarter bighas of land, built three houses, and married off both daughters. The daughters too are capable and are doing well in their homes. No one in the village can say that Tetara has ever cheated him of a single coin, nor that he has ever abused anyone. And God, too, has never dealt harshly with him.

'If he is going somewhere and happens to see someone on the way, he will at once go up to him and offer tobacco. If there is a dance performance anywhere within three kos and he comes to know of it, he will come and tell you. After supper, at night, he says to his wife, "Sajna Bhaiya was feeling low, so he asked me to come and sleep there. That is why I am going over."

‘The poor wife, hearing that his friend is low in spirits, agrees to let him go. The two of us then go off to watch the dance. And wherever there is a performance, he always gives a rupee or two to the troupe or the clown.’

‘This was about eight years ago. Rupalal of Sajmainiya hamlet brought home some seed of a heavy-grained paddy from his in-laws’ village. The paddy was indeed excellent, and all the householders of the village praised it. It yielded as much as five maunds to the katha.

Earlier, this village, Vikaspur, had belonged to the zamindari of Raghobabu. He gave it to his daughter as a bridal gift. From the day it passed into her possession, the very spirit of good yield seemed to depart. However fine the field or the paddy, it would not produce more than a maund to the katha. Often it was only half a maund, six paseris, or even five. But when Rupalal harvested five maunds to the katha, something stirred in the minds of the farmers. From that time onward, they began applying manure to the fields and preparing them more carefully. People also began bringing seeds of higher-yielding varieties from other villages.

Yet the village itself is strangely formed. The wet paddy land falls into three kinds. Half the land is deep, what we call chauri; forty percent is upland; and ten percent is low-lying. The result is this: if there is too much rain, the upper fields are washed away, while the lower ones are drowned. If there is too little rain, the lower fields still manage, but the upper ones dry up and fail. Altogether, the cultivator obtains only about half a crop. Yet even so, accepting it as God’s will, the farmer passes his days with a kind of resigned cheerfulness.

‘Seeing Rupalal’s yield, Tetara spoke of it to his wife. Laruati brought home fifteen seers of seed in exchange for her fifteen kathas of chauri land. Tetara kept that seed carefully tied in a bundle of straw. Then, in Phagun and Chait, when the chauri field had dried enough to be worked, he ploughed it thoroughly and sowed the paddy. The seedlings came up beautifully. Every day, the two of them would go again and again to look at them.

When the plants had grown a full span high, they weeded the whole field in eight days with hand-hoes. Then, in Baisakh, there came a good soaking rain, and even the youngest seedlings took root. The field filled out. In Ashadh there was a heavy, drumming rain, and

within eight days the paddy rose until it stood thigh-high.

‘Then the two of them decided to carry out a second weeding. At dawn they went out together to work. Standing on the embankment, they looked long and intently at the crop. Seeing it, Laruati said to Tetara, “The crop is so fine that the winnowing trays will overflow.” Tetara, too, was filled with joy and burst into laughter. Looking over his field and comparing it with those around it, he saw that no one had paddy like his, not in any neighbouring strip or ridge. Laughing, he said, “This year goddess Lakshmi has shown us her favour.” Adding to his thought, Laruati said, “When God gives, He tears open the roof to pour it in.” Saying this, the two of them laughed together and, still laughing, went down into the field to weed.

‘They had only been at work a short while when leeches fastened themselves to them. At first neither of them noticed. Only when the leeches had sucked their fill and swollen did Tetara see them. The moment he noticed them, he sprang out, stood upon the bund, and shouted to Laruati, “The leeches are drinking our blood. Pull them off at once, or they will drain even what little remains!”

Hearing this, Laruati began to climb out of the field, and then she too saw leeches clinging to her arm. In panic, she scrambled upwards, but her sari caught in the paddy, and in the struggle she fell upon the embankment. Rising again, she first tore off the leeches. As soon as she pulled them away, blood began to stream from her arm. She took a pinch of earth and pressed it to the wound with her fingers. The bleeding stopped.

‘By then, Tetara too had removed the leeches and flung them back into the field. He was about to step in again to work when he saw the field teeming with leeches. Abandoning the weeding, the two of them turned and went home,

The farmers set about bringing the upland fields under cultivation. Within fifteen days, the fields of the whole village had been planted. The crops were in the ground, but the rain ceased. The uplands began to dry. Whatever water had been standing in them gradually drained away and collected in the lower fields. The seedlings the farmers had transplanted stood just as they had been set, showing no further growth. Quietly, all the farmers began to feel that

the season had turned dry.

‘Cracks opened in the fields. The lower leaves of the paddy turned yellow and withered. Yet the paddy in the chauri fields continued to keep hope alive in the farmers’ hearts.

‘Five days before Durga Puja, there was a passing shower, but the water remained only on the roads and footpaths. Only the chauri fields held a sheet of water, knee-deep. So all the householders felt that even if no more rain came, the chauri would still yield. Thus the farmers of the village stood caught between hope and dejection. Those whose land lay mostly in the chauri were more hopeful; those with less of it were less so.

‘Tetara and Laruati were especially glad. The reason for their greater happiness was that this year the paddy promised to be better than in previous years. Tetara had one and a half bighas in all, fifteen kathas of upland and fifteen of chauri. In no year had he ever harvested more than twenty maunds of paddy, but this year there was hope from the new variety. The paddy in the chauri field filled Tetara and Laruati with fresh eagerness and a new tenderness towards one another. Whenever the two sat together and spoke of family matters, the conversation would first turn to the paddy in the chauri.

‘It was the day of Gabhaha Sankranti. On that day, all the householders of the village went to their fields to utter the ritual blessing for the crop. From noon onwards, Tetara and Laruati began quarrelling over who should go. Tetara said, ‘I shall go and say it.’ Laruati said, ‘No, I shall go.’ Tetara maintained that it was the man who went to the field and spoke the blessing. Laruati insisted that it was the guardian of the household who should go, and that she would do so.

‘With a sour expression, Tetara said irritably, ‘Very well, then go. You go and say it.’

‘Quietly, Laruati thought to herself that since there were only fifteen kathas, she would go around the entire field and utter the blessing everywhere. So, after finishing the work of the courtyard, she set off for the field. Tetara sat gloomily at the doorway, smoking one bidi after another, trying to calm his mind. Once he had quietened somewhat, he began cutting fodder.

‘After bowing before the household deity, Laruati resolved

that even if anyone spoke to her on the way, she would not turn to answer, lest the rite be broken.”

At this point, Devan asked, ‘Then what happened?’

Sajan said, ‘Listen. Samtoliya and Anguriya, mother and daughter, were cutting dried paddy by the roadside. Seeing Laruati, Samtoliya said, “This year her fortune has ripened well, while fire has fallen upon the rest of ours.”’

Without replying, Laruati merely turned her face away and went on. After she had gone some distance, Anguriya said to her mother, ‘Auntie did not even speak once.’

Trying to reassure her, Samtoliya said, ‘Child, wealth is such a thing that it can twist people’s minds. It can set brother against brother, husband against wife, and even bring father and son to blows. So why grieve over it? We have planted ten kathas of sweet potatoes. Somehow, there will surely be a hundred maunds. How much can we eat ourselves? We shall sell half and buy paddy with it. One meal we shall eat rice, and the next we shall boil sweet potatoes or bake bread. Will others pass their days, and we alone not manage ours?’

After going round all four embankments of the field, Laruati bowed to the paddy and stepped down into it. All around her, the heavy grain-heads swayed. The grains were thick as fingers, clean and closely set like the teeth of a fine comb. At the sight, Laruati was filled with delight. Having circled the field four times, she came out and, offering her reverence inwardly, turned towards home.

On the way back, a thought came to her: there was not a single large grain-bin in the house, so where would they store so much paddy? Then she reflected that there was still a month before the harvest, so she might as well have a large storage bin made at once. By the time she reached the courtyard, she had resolved that the very next day she would speak to the man who made such bins.

By sunset, Tetara was sitting by a post in the verandah of the cattle-shed. Smiling, Laruati came near him and said, ‘The paddy in the chauri has ripened abundantly. There is not a single large bin in the house, so have a large dhak made.’

The moment he heard her, the anger Tetara had felt earlier in the day flared up again. Irritated, he said, ‘Make a dhak or a granary,

why ask me? Am I a man in this house at all? I live like a servant and shall go on living so.'

Hearing his bitter words, Laruati looked at him from the corner of her eye, placed her right hand upon her head, and said gently, 'If husband and wife begin to live apart like buffaloes at separate troughs, then everything is lost. If you wish to see the field, go tomorrow and look at it yourself. Is the field going anywhere? Why have you become so angry over this?'

Through her glance, Laruati acknowledged her fault, and Tetara, by forgiving it, felt the quiet satisfaction of his own generosity. Smiling, he said, 'Let us make two smaller bins. If we make one large one, it may not be practical. It is not as though there will be such a great heap of paddy at once. And if there is not, how shall we keep the heavier and the lighter grain separate?'

Nodding, Laruati said, 'What you say is right. Those who have more land harvest more paddy, and so they make larger bins and granaries. But every household must provide according to its means. Poor people keep their grain and water in earthen jars and pitchers.'

The next morning, Tetara went to ask Lelha to make the bin. Lelha agreed. The following day, he cut four half-mature bamboos from near the bund, and in two days he split, pared, and prepared them. On the third day, he began making the dhak.

In the midst of it, Laruati came to Lelha and said, 'Brother, make one large basket as well. It will be useful at Chhath by the riverside, and later, if any grain remains, we can store paddy in it too.' Inwardly, Laruati even made a vow of offering to Chhath Mai.

Aghan came, and the cutting of the paddy began. In the upland fields, the crop had remained thin and poor, yet even that dried and withered paddy people began cutting and bringing home. From the middle of Aghan, the chauri fields too began to be harvested. Tetara's field lay in the middle, so the paddy along the edges had to be cut first before a path could be made in. The watchman told the farmers with boundary plots to cut their paddy and forbade those with inner fields from beginning yet. After eight days of harvesting, the path to Tetara's field was opened. That very evening, the watchman came and told him that the way was now clear.

At dawn the next day, Laruati cooked. The two of them ate and

then set off to cut the paddy. Before leaving, they fed and watered the cattle. Because of the cold wave, even the water had grown still and chill. There was no sign of sunlight.

Reaching the embankment, they stood gazing at the paddy. The heads stood upright, but there was not a single grain in them. A thought came to Laruati that perhaps someone had stolen and stripped the crop. She began looking about for the watchman. After a while, another thought came: perhaps only the edges had been stripped, but surely not the middle. She stepped down into the water and looked more closely. Even in the centre, there was not a single grain.

Seeing the empty heads, Laruati lost heart. A question rose within her: how had this happened?

Meanwhile, Tetara too went around all four embankments and saw the same thing everywhere. The two of them stood stunned upon the ridge. Neither spoke. It was as though all strength had left their bodies. The water in the field was cold as ice, and there was the grief of the ruined crop.

Laruati stiffened and fell there in the field, as though senseless. Seeing her fall, Tetara bent down and lifted her into his arms. Raising his head, he looked around for someone to call, but there was no one nearby. Somehow, he carried her to a dry patch of ground. She lay limp, without the slightest sign of awareness.

Tetara began to wonder what he should do, but nothing came to mind. Then, all at once, he thought that if he rubbed the soles of her feet, warmth might return to her body and she might revive. So he began to rub her feet. After a little while, Laruati opened her eyes. As soon as she did so, she straightened her sari and sat up slowly. Gradually, warmth returned to her body. Then the two of them went back to the courtyard.

As soon as they reached home, Tetara lit the dung fire, and the two of them sat warming themselves beside it.

'In the evening,' Sajan went on, 'Tetara came to me and said, "Brother, I am ruined. There is not a single grain of paddy in the field. It looks as though someone has stripped it all away." I asked him, "Has the grain been stolen, or has it simply not formed?" He replied, "If someone had stripped it, at least a little would have been left behind. But not a single grain remains." Then I said to him, "Your

seed was bad. Was it your own seed, or had you taken it from someone?" He answered, "I had got it from Rupalal." So I said, "That is how he deceived you. He is one of those cunning men. He cannot bear to see anyone else prosper. Whatever he has gathered, he has gathered for himself alone. People of gentle nature are too afraid to speak, and so he continues as he pleases. His tongue is bold, and his stick is ready, so no one dares say a word. Now what can be done? You must endure it."'

Seeing Tetara's hope shattered, his mind shaken, and his eyes filled with tears, little came to Sajan's mind at first. Tetara said, 'Brother, not a single grain has come. What shall we eat throughout the year?'

Sajan tried to raise his spirits and said, 'You do not even know the wealth you possess. You have much. Sell one calf, and that alone will sustain you for six months. After that, we shall see. And in those six months, will you sit idle with folded hands? Do not worry.'

Tetara said, 'Then I shall go, brother?'

Sajan replied, 'Have some tobacco first, and then go.'

'I do not feel like it,' Tetara said.

So Sajan said, 'Steady your mind. There are people whose earning sons die, and even they endure it. Yours is only the loss of one field's yield. The field is still there, and you may yet see a better harvest from it.'

On returning home, Tetara told Laruati everything. Her eyes turned red, and she began speaking loudly and furiously. 'That Rupalal is a scoundrel. He is rotten, and so is his wife. You stay here in the courtyard. I am going, and I shall curse him to his face before I return. Until I spit before him, my heart will not be at peace.'

Tetara fell into confusion. At one moment, he felt he had been wrong to tell his wife at all. At another, he felt that the two of them should indeed go and confront Rupalal at his very door. Then again it occurred to him that Rupalal was a man of influence and would not let the matter pass without violence. The grain was already lost; must they now be beaten for nothing as well?

At last, he thought it best that, if his wife must abuse him, she should at least do so from within the courtyard. But Laruati, shouting

abuse at Rupalal, came out onto the road. Tetara stood before her and caught hold of her arm. Yet the more he restrained her, the more she struggled forward, crying out and hurling abuse.

At that very moment, Rupalal happened to be returning home along the same road. Hearing Laruati's curses, he stopped in surprise, then lowered his eyes and went straight into his house.

Hearing the commotion, I too went there. Seeing Tetara's wife, her sari dishevelled, hair loosened, eyes blazing, and shouting abuse without restraint, I said, 'Daughter, be calm. I give you full credit for having spoken against Rupalal to his face. But what can be done? Until a thing is truly one's own, such men will continue their deceit. Did we not see how Chhathua uprooted Raviya's mango saplings and planted them in his own field? Be quiet now.'

Hearing me, the poor woman straightened her sari, covered her head, and in a softer voice said, 'Brother, I respect you greatly, and so I have listened to you. Otherwise, today I would have struck that rogue down.'

Devan had been listening to Sajan's tale with his eyes closed. At these words, he opened them. Quietly, he began to reflect that the punishment Rupalal deserved had not come to him. Why had it not? Perhaps because in society too there are those who wield power and those who do not. There is no one to hold the powerful to account for their wrongdoing, while the faults of the poor are punished far beyond what is just.

After remaining silent for a while, Devan said to Sajan, 'You possess a whole granary of wisdom.'

Smiling, Sajan replied, 'My boy, the night has grown late, and we are all tired from the day's labour. You too should eat and take your rest. I shall go now.' ❑

10

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At daybreak, people from the hamlet began arriving one after another at Bachelal's house. Seeing them, Sumitra stopped sweeping the courtyard and came out to the front, asking everyone to sit down. There was happiness in all their hearts, but curiosity as well.

Hearing the hum of voices, Bachelal too rose from his bed and began listening, wondering whether something untoward had occurred. But the noise was so great that nothing could be understood clearly. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he came out and looked. Some men were sitting on the benches, some were standing, and others were still approaching along the road. There was joy in their minds, and smiles on their faces.

Sumitra said to Bachelal, 'Son, they have all come to see the mat, the lamps, and the utensils you brought yesterday.'

Hearing this, Bachelal went to the hand pump, cleaned his teeth with a little earth, rinsed his mouth, and returned. Then he opened the front room and brought everything out. Spreading the mat and the jajim upon the threshing floor and seating everyone there, he said, 'I may have bought these things, but they belong to all of you. Whenever anyone needs them, take them and use them. This mat, this jajim, these lamps, and these utensils are to be regarded as your own.'

At his words, all of them clapped in approval. By then Achhelal too had arrived. Sumitra went into the courtyard to arrange tea. But as she considered the number of people, she could not see how the tea was to be prepared, or how it would be served. There was only a little tea, sugar, and milk in the house, and it would not suffice.

Sumitra stood in genuine perplexity.

Yet even in that moment, it occurred to her that if people from the community had come to her door and she did not serve them tea, what would become of the household's dignity?

From the courtyard, she beckoned to Achhelal. He came at once. Sumitra said, 'Son, today is the first day the community has come to our door. If we do not even serve tea, how will that appear?'

Nodding, Achhelal replied, 'Yes, that would be a slight to the community, and an even greater blow to the honour of the house. When everything can be managed, why should we let our honour suffer? I shall bring the milk. The tea and sugar can be fetched from the shop. There is a large enough vessel for preparing it. And if there are no cups or glasses, we shall buy a hundred plastic tumblers. It will take some effort, certainly, but it is not impossible. I shall call Jugai as well. He can go to the shop, while you light the stove and set the pot on. By the time you have the vessel ready and the fire lit, these tasks will also be done.'

Sumitra said, 'Yes, call Jugai.'

Achhelal called out to him and said, 'Jugai, go quickly to the shop. Bring tea, sugar, glasses, tobacco, bidis, and betel nut. By good fortune, ten men have come here today.'

Jugai went to the shop, and Achhelal went to fetch the milk. Meanwhile, Sumitra quickly took a glass of water and sprinkled the hearth to purify it before lighting it.

Ruma sat on the verandah, seething inwardly yet saying nothing, as though her heart were burning with a dry, crackling fire without flame. It seemed to her that everyone had conspired to torment her. But Bachelal's heart, in his happiness, trembled and quivered like something floating upon water stirred by the wind.

The tea was prepared, and everyone drank it. Some placed tobacco in their mouths, some took a bidi, some chewed pieces of betel nut, and then, tying up their cloth bundles, they took their leave. Just as the men had gathered at Bachelal's doorway, so too the old men and women of the hamlet had assembled beneath the jamun tree on the fallow land, while the little girls sat together beneath the oleander bushes by the pond.

Everyone was absorbed in their own delight, as though no one had any work left in house or courtyard. Thithar, Doman, Kujai, and Botal sat together on the raised platform of Thithar's house. Their hearts were full of happiness. The hardship the hamlet had endured until now, for want of cooking vessels, light, and bedding, had suddenly lifted.

Doman said to Botal, 'Brother Botal, a certain responsibility has now come upon us. True, these things belong to the whole village, but in the first place they have come into the care of our own hamlet. So it falls upon us to see that, in one wedding season, there are not two or more demands at the same time. The things are still few. It would be best if, in one season, there were only one marriage at a time.'

Hearing Doman's words, Botal said nothing, but Thithar spoke up, 'Well said, Doman. One must stretch one's legs only as far as the mat allows. And we must indeed be grateful to Bachelal for doing even this much. Many people in the village earn, but why did such wisdom never come to any of them? The forest sustains the lion, and the lion protects the forest. Just as poor Bachelal has taken a step for the good of society, so too let us keep step with him. That poor fellow's family had become entangled, the whole household had become like that of a widow, yet even so we must give thanks to that widowed mother who kept the house standing upright.'

Food, drink, work, and labour all seemed forgotten. The four of them went on talking without pause.

By nine o'clock, Bachelal, Achhelal, and Jugai were still at the doorway. Bachelal said to Jugai, 'Brother Jugai, I am going to school. Meanwhile, you and your wife should go to the doctor. I shall come there directly from school. So long as the eyes remain open, this world exists; the moment they close, the world is gone. Therefore, one must not treat bodily illness as a trifle, but as an enemy. And what age are you at, after all? Poverty often kills people before their years are spent. Now go. See to the work at home. I too must bathe, eat, and leave for school.'

Jugai rose and took his leave. Achhelal said to Bachelal, 'Son, today it has felt as though, after an earthquake, the whole village has been shaken awake.'

Bachelal's heart overflowed with happiness. Smiling, he said, 'Uncle, just as you are alone, so am I. When I go off to school, the doorway lies empty and deserted. If we set up such an arrangement, the work will go on, and the threshold will not remain barren. You too have only a small house and very little homestead land. So bring your house here. If both households stand together, there will be security for both, and the cattle too will be properly cared for.

'The cow we have tied at the post is of an old breed and gives little milk. We shall buy a good Jersey cow as well. When one has one's own resources, one does not go wanting in times of need.

'All these days I have lived like a blind man, and because of that I understood neither family nor society. Now that my sight has opened, I have begun to understand these things. Great industrialists grow rich from the money I keep in the bank, while the man who earns it spends his whole life raising children, educating them, marrying them off, and then dies.

'My bicycle too is now bought. Whatever time it saves, I shall use to teach the children of the hamlet. I already receive my salary from the school, so I shall not take a single coin from anyone. I do not yet know farming, but I do know how to read and teach. I shall read books on farming, listen to the radio, learn modern methods, and then explain them to you all.

'Now I have begun to understand that, though I became a teacher, I have not known how to live life. Ever since I left school, the most I have read in the evenings are a few lines from the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. Even those I do not truly read; I merely recite them. The deeper meaning within them I do not understand, and so life has remained as dark as before. Until people learn the right way of living, life will hold no true meaning.

'But now the time has come. I must go to school. If I remain caught up in talk, I shall be late. You too go now.'

At half past four, Bachelal reached the doctor's clinic. Jugai and his wife had arrived before him. As it was evening, there were not many patients there.

Seeing Bachelal, the doctor asked, 'Master Sahib, is it you who need to be examined, or is someone else unwell?'

Pointing to Jugai, Bachelal said, 'Doctor Sahib, it is his wife who needs to be seen.'

Beside the doctor's chair stood a stool, and Jugai's wife went and sat upon it. The doctor examined her with his stethoscope and, having understood the matter, said to Bachelal,

'Three or four tests will need to be done. Once I have seen the reports, I shall prescribe the medicines properly. For the present, I am giving two doses to begin with. Tomorrow I shall write the full prescription. In fifteen to twenty days, the patient should recover.'

At the doctor's words, it seemed as though a new life began to stir before Jugai's eyes in the form of his wife. And why should it not? The poor man had already given up hope for her. Just as, when something is being swept away by a current, the sight of even a small stick to cling to awakens hope, so it was with Jugai.

The anger that Ruma had suppressed had not subsided; inwardly, it continued to smoulder. In the evening, Bachelal returned from his errands, washed his hands and feet, and sat at the front. Sumitra came and turned up the lantern flame. Just then Ruma brought the tea, set it beside him, and was about to leave when Bachelal said,

'Look, at present there are only three of us. All three belong to one family. A family is an institution; you may call it a temple or a sacred place. Just as a priest remains engaged day and night in sustaining a temple, so too every member of a family must labour in that same spirit to sustain the household. If one person alone works while another wishes only to sit idle, how long can such a house endure?

'The question is not of bricks and bamboo; it is of human beings. And the first measure of that question is this: what kind of being ought a human being to be? If one merely looks about, one sees people of many kinds and habits. But that is not the point. Only when one reflects with the true measure of humanity does one begin to understand.

'It is the duty of every person to live as a true human being. We are no longer children. If one does not understand a matter or a task, there is no shame in learning it from another.'

Meanwhile, Jugai's wife's illness began gradually to subside. As it receded, her strength returned, and her appetite improved. Seeing her condition improve, Jugai, along with the medicines and proper diet, also managed to procure a little cow's milk for her. Within eight days, Dhanma's body had begun to recover. As his wife regained her strength, Jugai's broken hopes began to revive.

Until now, the way Ruma regarded her mother-in-law had never been what it ought to have been. Instead of seeing her truly as a mother, she treated her as though she were merely another person. What sort of conduct a daughter-in-law ought to show towards her mother-in-law was something Ruma either never understood, or understood yet chose to ignore. Whenever Sumitra asked her to do something, Ruma would begin muttering at once, let alone perform the task. In the end, seeing this repeatedly, Sumitra stopped asking her altogether.

In her own heart, only this thought remained: if I am no longer anyone's guardian, then no one is mine either. Silently she would tell herself that whatever duties had belonged to her towards her parents-in-law and her children, she had fulfilled them properly, so no one could justly reproach her. The daughter-in-law would perform her own duties, and the son his. And if they did not serve her, then so be it.

So long as I have food to eat and strength in my body, why should I lower my eyes? Am I to be born again and live all this once more? Every human being earns his humanity through his own actions, and once that humanity is attained, the pleasures and pains of the body cannot easily lead him astray.

It may be that the daughter-in-law considers me helpless because I am widowed. But that too is the course of life. Do all women die while their husbands still live? Certainly not. The cause of death is one thing, and family relations another. Perhaps in her parents' home she saw some widowed woman living in suffering, or bearing the harsh conduct of a daughter-in-law.'

As these thoughts rose in Sumitra's mind, it seemed as though her eyes themselves began to redden. In a steady, fearless voice, she murmured to herself, 'Other women may not understand me, but I understand life, and so I have my own way of living it. If the

daughter-in-law treats me as one worthy of a mother's place, then I too shall treat her as a daughter. Otherwise, if she is mistress of her own mind, then I too am mistress of mine.'

Yet for some days now, Sumitra had begun to notice a change in Ruma. Quietly, she tried to judge whether this was mere appearance or a true improvement in her conduct. Still, Sumitra never placed as much weight on the daughter-in-law's faults as she did on her son's weakness. For how far could a woman from another household advance in a new home unless there were causes behind it? Causes, of course, are many, but the most important of all is the weakness of the man. If a man can bring even an enormous, unreasoning creature like an elephant under control, can it truly be beyond him to guide a thoughtful woman towards fuller understanding?

Until only a few days earlier, Ruma used to rise last in the courtyard; now she had begun rising first. As soon as she rose, even before washing, she would sweep the courtyard and the house, plaster the hearth, wash the utensils, and then attend to her own needs. Not only that, she had begun to regard her mother-in-law as one worthy of a mother's place. In other words, she had started performing, of her own accord, the duties a daughter-in-law owes to a mother. Whatever work she did not know, she began learning from Sumitra and then doing it.

And Sumitra too, seeing this change in her daughter-in-law, began to explain things to her with care:

'Daughter, whatever experience I have gathered, learn from it and bring it into your life. At the same time, whatever you have learnt in your parents' home, weigh that too with a clear mind. Keep what is good and leave what is not. Look closely at how the family has lived till now, and at the changes that are coming with time, and move forward with awareness of both. Only then will you be able to keep pace with the times. Whoever tries to live apart from this will remain inwardly troubled, and peace of mind will continue to elude him.'

Ruma began to accept her mother-in-law's way of thinking.

It was a festival day, and the school was closed. But Bachelal was no longer as he once had been; he rose at four o'clock. Having risen, he called out to Achhelal. Before Achhelal arrived, Sumitra too

had come out to the front. The three of them began talking. Bachelal asked,

'Uncle, by now the work of the fields must surely be going more smoothly?'

At this, Achhelal replied, 'Son, the pattern of household life here is more unsound than sound. Much will have to be done if the structure of farming and domestic life is to be improved. Until that happens, what we hope for will not come about. To be sure, I myself do not understand everything. Until now I have been only a field-hand, so how could I fully understand the life of a householder? But bhouji has lived in such a household from her parents' home to this one, and has managed it for many years. So her experience is far greater.'

Hearing Achhelal's words, Sumitra began to reflect inwardly: Achhelal has spoken rightly. Yet I too have grown old now and have forgotten many things. Much work has fallen away from me, and much I have set aside myself. Still, unless a man first stands firmly upon the ground, neither he nor his family can find their way forward. Until he stands upon the earth, how will he move ahead?

It may be that someone is carried far forward by mere gusts of circumstance, but such a life is uncertain. One generation may advance far in that way, but whether the next will move further or fall behind is hard to say. For whatever rises too high without foundation will slip at that very height. It will lack both the grounding of the earth and the path by which to move onward.

There are, in truth, two ways of thinking and two roads, and they stand in conflict with one another. That conflict will only deepen with time. Unless one understands both paths, to walk blindly is to stumble. Yet the real question is this: how to move with time, as mankind always must. And that is no easy task.

As these thoughts formed in her mind, Sumitra began to speak:

'Son, no family can truly prosper until every member takes hold of the road and walks upon it. This is your own household. You labour all day, yet you are too indulgent towards your wife. If she withdraws from work, and you let matters pass, what will become of the home? But just as you go out, work, and bring in income, if she too were to manage the household properly, would the family not

thrive?

‘Therefore, each person must labour according to his place and capacity. And whoever stands as the guardian of the household must also organise the work according to those present, so that the income of the home may increase and idleness be driven out.

‘As things stand, one sees every household declining because of flood and drought. Yet in the twelve months of the year, it is only the four months of rain that determine the rest. What is astonishing is that the remaining eight months are given almost no thought. The saddest thing is that during those eight months, the householder does not plan at all.

‘The chief necessity of farming is water, yet people scarcely attend to it. If proper arrangements were made for irrigation, not only would the yield increase, but the variety of crops as well. There was a time when people knew little of water management, manure, or improved seed, and still household life somehow continued. But that is no reason to remain as we are.

‘Your fields are not all in one place, yet they are not far apart. If you were to arrange for a borewell and irrigate them, do you think they would yield no more than they do now? Just as, within the twenty-four hours of day and night, darkness gives way to light, so it is with all things.

‘At present, there are two of you, husband and wife, and two more from Achhelal’s household. There are four people fit for proper work, yet how much work is truly being done? One must reckon all this and then set the work in motion, not in the manner of idlers who say, “What work shall we take up?”

‘It is plain before your eyes that if water is properly managed, crops will flourish throughout the year. With manure and good seed, the yield will be so abundant that there will scarcely be room to store it. There will be enough straw and fodder to keep several head of cattle. If you keep cattle, you will have milk, and if there is surplus, you can sell that as well. The more the income of the household increases, the more you will move forward.’

Hearing his mother’s words, it was as though a sudden illumination came to Bachelal. The moment it did, he said,

‘Mother, until now my thoughts had never turned in this direction. But now I see that those who truly work are able to pass their lives in contentment. Uncle, the first thing to be done is to arrange a borewell and a pump set. There is no holiday today, but the day after tomorrow is Sunday. The two of us shall go to the market, make proper enquiries, and then do whatever seems necessary.’

Achhelal said, ‘Son, the bank people also give loans for borewells and pump sets. Even if one repays them year by year with interest, it can still be managed.’

Bachelal replied, ‘When there is already a steady salary, why should we take a loan? It is true that the money we had saved has been spent, but in another hundred days ten thousand rupees will come. Since so many days have already passed, let a few more pass as well. But unless we create the means of earning, idleness will never leave us.’

At dawn, Sumitra rose and came out to the verandah. She took up the broom and had just begun sweeping the front when Achhelal arrived. There was no lime left in his small lime-box, so he had come to fetch some. On other days, as soon as he awoke, Achhelal would rise from his bedding, take the water kept overnight in the lota, rinse his mouth twice, drink what remained, and then, with tobacco in his mouth, begin singing the morning hymn. But today, because of the need for lime, he had not sung the dawn-song and had come here instead.

Sumitra brought lime from the courtyard and gave it to him. Taking it, Achhelal began to mix his tobacco. Meanwhile, the two of them began to talk. Hearing their conversation, Bachelal too came and stood nearby.

Sumitra was saying to Achhelal, ‘Son, there was a time when my own household was full and prosperous, and both my father-in-law and mother-in-law were alive. I was young then. In the village, I was counted among the finest singers. Wherever there was any occasion, my name would surely be called. And I too, whether by day or night, scarcely knew rest. Having managed the work of my own house and courtyard, I would go wherever I was called.

‘My parents’ home lies in the Pachhai region. The songs, the speech, the manners, the whole way of life there are finer than in the

Allapur tract. But in our village, most married women are from Allapur, while only one or two come from the Bhaur region. Pachhai and Bhaur resemble one another in many ways, but Allapur has quite a different character.

'Even so, the married women of Allapur are more industrious. They tuck up the front of their saris like men and labour in the fields all day long, heedless of sun or rain.'

'Let me tell you something. At my parents' home, close by our house, there stood the house of Pandit Kaka. He had taught in many Sanskrit schools across the region. He was such a man of discipline and strictness that he never truly got on with the other teachers. Unless someone spoke to him first, he would not speak, nor would he visit anyone's house without reason. Even so, I never once saw him sitting idle; he was always engaged in some task or another.

'One day a scholar came from the western region. He too was a learned man. Early in the morning, both performed their worship, ate two bananas each, and then sat down to debate the scriptures. What Pandit Kaka said, and what the other replied, no one else could understand. The two of them were wholly absorbed in their discussion.

'After a long while, Pandit Kaka spat upon the ground three times. At once the face of that western scholar fell, as though he might weep. At noon he was served a fine meal, and in the late afternoon he was respectfully sent off with a dhoti, kurta, shawl, and turban.

'But yes, I was saying that I used to answer the call of the whole village. From the day he died, I stopped going out in that way. When I compare people now with those of earlier times, the difference seems as great as that between sky and netherworld.

'I bore two children myself. Never once did I take a needle or swallow a pellet, and yet no illness ever took hold of me. When my first child was born, my mother-in-law brought sathaura sweets from the market, and that alone I ate. Now I see that while people roam through markets and bazaars, go to the cinema or circus, and wander through fairs and festivals, they remain perfectly healthy. But the moment work comes, every illness in the world seems to descend upon them…

Go on now, it is time for work.'

Every day, after drinking his morning tea, Bachelal began teaching the children of the hamlet. He taught them until it was time for him to leave for school. He took not a single coin from anyone. All the boys and girls of the hamlet began to grow steady in their studies, and because of that, Bachelal's own standing began to rise. Seeing his work, Sumitra felt quietly content. ❑

11

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Shivkumar and Ramnath passed the matriculation examination in the first division. News of their result spread everywhere like wildfire, even though it had not yet reached the school, and neither of the boys had seen it in the newspaper with his own eyes.

Shivkumar was Bachelal's son, and Ramnath Achhelal's. The news had reached everyone's ears, certainly, but how could one place full trust in it without seeing it for oneself?

Calling out to Shivkumar, Bachelal said, 'Son, on other days the newspaper arrives by eight o'clock, but today it has not come at all. So go to Jhanjharpur and buy one there.'

The two boys set off on their bicycles to fetch the paper.

Meanwhile, Bachelal kept reasoning things out in his mind. How had people come to know of the result before it had even arrived? Perhaps the newspaper vendor, who came daily, had sold them all along the way to eager students and guardians. That was likely why none remained for regular customers.

At the school, students had already begun to gather to see the result. The headmaster, having obtained a newspaper, marked the first, second, and third divisions in his register with a red pencil, and then pinned the printed result on the outer wall.

Achhelal, too, was inwardly full of joy. His happiness lay in the thought that the son of an unlettered man, who had lived in want on every side, had now passed. Sumitra's joy arose from another feeling: the child she had nurtured from birth had today climbed one

step higher. Ruma, for her part, said nothing openly, yet inwardly she felt not half as much happiness at her own son's success as sorrow at Ramnath's.

Ramnath and Shivkumar reached the bookstall that served as the wholesale dealer for newspapers. There, however, every copy had already been sold. Bewildered and disappointed, the two boys went further into the bazaar. In one shop they spotted a newspaper. Shivkumar hurried up to the shopkeeper and said, 'You have already read the paper. I need it for something important. The matriculation result has been published in it, so please give it to me. I shall pay whatever its proper price is.'

The shopkeeper was willing, but his son, his eyes reddening, said, 'Do not give it for two rupees. Today its price is fifty.'

Hearing this, the father replied, 'Son, is not this whole shop enough for earning? Why do such a thing?'

The son flared up and said, 'Father, if you are so charitable, then take your begging bowl and go off to Vrindavan.'

At the words 'mendicant's gourd', the father's temper flared like that of Narasimha. Pouncing upon his son like a tiger, he said, 'This shop is the earning of a lifetime. Within these four kos (miles), people know us as honest traders, and shall I cast all that into the dust?'

Taking the newspaper from the counter and placing it in Shivkumar's hand, he said, 'Take it, son. I shall not take a single coin for it.'

The two boys took the paper and looked up their results. The moment they saw them, waves of joy rose in their hearts. Taking their bicycles, they set off for home. On the way, they felt as though they might fly like aeroplanes. Only two students had secured the first division.

One of the teachers came to Bachelal's house carrying a newspaper, intending to inform the boys of the result. At the sight of such warmth and concern, Bachelal felt that there was still no lack of good people in the world. The master was just finishing his morning meal and drinking tea when the boys arrived. Both bowed to their teacher.

Sumitra's heart overflowed with joy. Coming near Bachelal, she said, 'Son, the master is here as well. Invite all the children whom you teach at home. As your son is yours, so he is my grandson too. On such happy news, we must hold a feast and feed everyone.'

Twenty years earlier, with the help of the villagers, a high school had been established. For the first three or four years, there were only two hundred students. The teachers worked for a salary of merely fifty rupees a month. In the countryside, the number of educated people was still small. Yet all the teachers held firmly to the belief that education must spread through the region. Even if hardship had to be endured, they resolved that the school must continue. Each teacher came from his own home and, through such effort, kept the school alive.

Since the school was nearby, both Shivkumar and Ramnath enrolled there. The teaching was of a high standard. From Class Eight onwards, Shivkumar consistently stood first and Ramnath second. This continued up to the matriculation test examination. Shivkumar had taken Science, and Ramnath Arts. Up to Class Nine, Bachelal worked diligently with both of them at home, instilling in them the discipline of study.

Just as Shivkumar excelled in mathematics, so Ramnath excelled in geography. In the annual examinations, Shivkumar would score full marks in mathematics, and Ramnath only a few marks fewer in geography. Not a single day in the whole year did either of them miss school.

On their way to school, each would write five English words on the palm of his hand and memorise them. By the time they reached school, each would recite his words to the other. Once there, they would wash the words from their palms at the hand pump. Then, after school ended, they would again write five new words and learn them on the way home.

It is true that in winter the days are shorter, and because of the cold the students would often arrive late. Even so, the headmaster, understanding the season, would still mark them present. For this reason, he was greatly respected by the students. He often said to the teachers,

'More important than teaching is this: awaken in the students

the desire to learn. The student in whom the hunger for knowledge awakens will surely study of his own accord. And that will make our work of teaching easier as well.'

If he saw a student without books, or dressed in worn and tattered clothes, he would call him into the office, ask about his family's condition, and offer help.

Though the headmaster came from a prosperous and comfortable background, it was as though the compassion of the poor had entered his very being. He never regarded himself as merely a teacher. Unlike many teachers of today, he did not keep a vulture's eye fixed upon his salary. Rather, he believed that just as one's own children belong to oneself, so too do one's students. Parents may give birth to children and raise them, but the teacher is the divine potter who shapes a human being upon the wheel.

Dineshbabu was deeply content in his own family life as well. His father had been a teacher in a lower primary school, and it was he who had guided him, enabling him to complete his B.A. and become a teacher in a high school. Later, when Dineshbabu's son, Sushil, passed his M.A. and became a college lecturer, the hearts of husband and wife were filled with joy, like a lake blooming with countless lotuses and alive with birds of many colours. From the very day his son entered service, Dineshbabu began giving his own salary to poor students.

The result sheets and mark sheets arrived at the school. One by one, the students came to collect them. Shivkumar and Ramnath went as well. Looking closely at their marks, the headmaster said, 'My boys, will you continue your studies further? If there is any difficulty, tell me. For now, take your mark sheets home, and tomorrow bring your fathers to me.'

The boys took their mark sheets and left.

Bachelal and Achhelal set out to meet Dineshbabu, taking Shivkumar and Ramnath with them. Dineshbabu was waiting for them. Both men bowed and sat down in the office. Bachelal asked, 'Was it through Shivkumar and Ramnath that you sent for us?'

Dineshbabu replied, 'Yes. I sent for you because both boys are fit for further study, and their names should be entered in a good college.'

‘That is our thought as well,’ Bachelal said. ‘As soon as the school papers are ready, we shall have them admitted without delay.’

‘All the papers can be prepared today. If possible, have them admitted tomorrow; if not, then the day after.’

‘I too work in a primary school. Tomorrow I shall apply for leave for the following day, and then I shall take them for admission.’

Dineshbabu called the clerk and had all the formalities completed. After that, everyone took their leave.

The next day, Bachelal went to school and submitted his leave application. In the evening he said to Sumitra, ‘Mother, tomorrow we shall go to Madhubani to have Shivkumar and Ramnath admitted.’

At the thought of her grandson entering college, Sumitra said,

‘My son, Shivkumar is your child, but he is my grandson too. And Ramnath, whom I have helped raise from birth, is no less dear to me. Poor Achhelal is an unlettered man, yet he is as much a human being as anyone else.

‘When you passed matriculation, it was my wish to send you to college as well. But seeing the broken condition of the household, that desire remained buried in my heart. Even so, I did not grieve deeply. I would have felt greater sorrow had your father himself been educated up to high school. Though I was a helpless woman, I did what I could.

‘But now it is your duty to educate your son at least up to a B.A. As for Ramnath, that responsibility is not yours in the same way, yet you have raised him almost as your own. So when you go to Madhubani tomorrow, take Achhelal with you. Such moments remain in a man’s heart for life. Not only Achhelal, even Ramnath will remember it.’

Inwardly, Bachelal worked out the timings. The train from Nirmali to Jayanagar left at five o’clock, so they would have to reach their own station, Tamuria, by half past five. The train reached Madhubani at half past nine. The college office would surely open at ten, so if they arrived at that time and completed their work promptly, they could return to the station by half past three. Then they would catch the same train back and be home again by the next morning. On the way out, after getting down from the train, they would eat at the

hotel near the station and then take a rickshaw. Bachelal explained all this to the boys and to Achhelal as well.

At half past four, Bachelal rose and woke the others. After relieving themselves, they bathed. Achhelal was ready, and Shivkumar and Ramnath had also bathed and dressed. At a quarter to five, the four of them set out for the station. By six o'clock, the train had reached Tamuria. Shivkumar had already bought the tickets for all four, and they took their seats.

None of the others, except Bachelal, had ever seen Madhubani before. All manner of thoughts and imaginings arose in their minds. Meanwhile, Bachelal quietly arranged the order of the day's work in his head. Achhelal too found himself thinking: in the village, people came all the way to Madhubani for quarrels and legal disputes. Today, he thought, I shall see the courts, and even the jail, and know what they are like. Who knows whether I shall ever come again?

At half past nine, the train reached Madhubani. The four men got down and set off. At the hotel near the station, they ate, and after a short rest they took a rickshaw to R.K. College.

They went to the office and handed over their papers to the clerk. The clerk examined them, entered the names, and issued a receipt. Bachelal paid the fees. Handing over the list of books, the clerk informed them that classes would begin on the fifteenth. By eleven o'clock, they had left the college and made their way to the bazaar, where they went to a bookshop.

On reaching the shop, Bachelal gave the bookseller the list and asked for the required texts. Seating him inside, the bookseller placed before him several books for each subject by different authors. Bachelal realised there was no time to examine them all in detail, so he began selecting by edition. If two books in a subject seemed worthwhile, he took both. Along with the course books, he bought a Hindi dictionary and an English dictionary, as well as exercise books for each subject.

Seeing the care with which Bachelal made his selections, the bookseller felt pleased. He sent his servant to bring tea and refreshments. While they were drinking tea, the bookseller asked, 'What do you do for your livelihood?'

Bachelal wondered inwardly what concern this might be to the

bookseller, yet it would not be right to leave the question unanswered. Smiling, he replied, 'I am a teacher in a lower primary school.'

At this, the bookseller took out a copy of the Ashtavakra Gita and, handing it to him without charge, said, 'Whenever you come to Madhubani, do come and see me.'

'Very well,' said Bachelal.

Having paid for the books, the four of them took their leave. One bundle was in Shivkumar's hands and another in Ramnath's, while the Gita, neatly wrapped in newspaper, was in Bachelal's hand. It occurred to Bachelal that, since they had come so far and still had two or three hours to spare, they might as well settle the matter of lodging. As he was already there, it would save them the trouble of returning again for that purpose.

Looking at the new, substantial books, Shivkumar thought to himself that, now that he had exercise books for every subject, he would study with full dedication. Each day he would memorise ten English words and ten Hindi words. Besides these, every subject had its own specialised vocabulary, which would also need to be mastered. By the time the college opened, he would learn as many of these as possible, so that he would face no difficulty in class.

He resolved to divide his time among all the subjects, lest his studies become one-sided. Every subject mattered, and one had to pass in all of them in order to succeed. If he scored highly in one but failed in another, what use would that be? So first he must prepare each subject well enough to secure passing marks in all. Only then would higher marks and a good division follow.

Ramnath had already opened the grammar book and glanced through it in the shop. He saw that much of it was familiar from high school, only somewhat more detailed. There would be less that was entirely new to learn, and this gave him quiet satisfaction.

The four of them were walking towards the station, one a little ahead, another a little behind, when a man on a bicycle came up, stopped, and saluted Bachelal. Bachelal had been walking with his head lowered; hearing the greeting, he looked up and returned it with folded hands. Though he responded, he did not recognise the man and kept looking at him, trying to recall who he might be.

The man understood at once and said, 'Master Sahib, it is I, Ramesara. I work here in the Cooperative Bank.'

At once Bachelal remembered that he was a former pupil. Smiling, he said,

'My boy, I did not recognise you at all. You were once as thin as a stick, and now you have grown strong. Do you keep your family here as well?'

Beaming, Ramesara replied, 'I have built my own house here. You must honour it with your presence today. It is my good fortune that you have come. I myself go to the village only rarely. Life has kept me so occupied that I scarcely find time even to meet people properly.'

Bachelal asked, 'How many children do you have?'

'Two,' Ramesara said. 'We are two adults ourselves, so we are a family of four. And where have you come from?'

'We came to have these two boys admitted to college. Now the next matter is to arrange lodging for them. If you know of a quiet place, kindly help us settle it.'

Ramesara replied, 'So long as I am here, how can there be no lodging for you? Come first and have some tea; then we shall speak of it.'

Ramesara took them all to a hotel, where he had refreshments and tea served, followed by betel. After that, the five of them set off towards the railway station. When they reached the waiting room, Bachelal said to him, 'It is still bank hours. You ought to go.'

'Master Sahib, even if I do not go to the bank now, nothing will happen. I had been sent out on bank business to serve a notice, so at present I am officially on outside duty. I can give my explanation tomorrow.'

'The train will still take some time to arrive. In the meantime, let us settle the matter of lodging. Tell me, would a hostel be better, or a lodge?'

'Master Sahib, neither would be suitable. The atmosphere in Madhubani is such that many students neglect their studies and spend their time in quarrels and factional disputes, often dividing themselves along caste lines. Those who truly wish to study live

quietly in private houses. In my own home there are four rooms. Three are sufficient for our household, and one lies unused.'

'And what rent would you take?'

Smiling, Ramesara replied, 'I shall take no rent from you. It is by your grace that I have this position. And are not your students, in a way, my younger brothers?'

'If it were only for ten or fifteen days, that would be different. But this is a long-term matter.'

'As for rent, I shall say nothing. But this much I assure you: I will certainly provide the boys with a room.'

Bachelal, somewhat uncertain, turned to Achhelal and said, 'Uncle, you decide what the rent should be.'

Flustered, Achhelal said, 'Fifty rupees a month.'

The two agreed upon it. Once this was settled, Bachelal asked, 'And how will their meals be arranged?'

'We shall send rice and pulses from the village. Food is cooked in my household in any case, and the boys will eat from the same kitchen.'

'But beyond rice and pulses, there will still be expenses–salt, oil, vegetables, and the rest. For that, we shall give another hundred rupees a month.'

'Very well,' said Ramesara.

Thus everything was arranged. Then Bachelal said to Achhelal, 'Uncle, you go and see the room. I shall rest here meanwhile.'

Taking the others with him, Ramesara set off. His house lay in Chakdah, to the east of the station, in a quiet area. They saw the lodging and returned directly. Then they purchased their tickets. After a short while, the train arrived, and by dawn the next morning they had reached their own station again.

On the road from Tamuria back to the village, Achhelal said to Bachelal, 'Son, this day has been most auspicious.'

'How so?' asked Bachelal.

'So much work was accomplished in a single day. I had thought it would take many days, I do not know how many. On the

way there, I even felt like asking you to buy me a dhoti and a shawl, but I held my tongue.'

'Uncle, there is such a thing as method in work. And, of course, there is also such a thing as good fortune. The man who knows how to set about his work can accomplish much in little time, while one without method takes long even over a small task. And I speak of good fortune because things might easily have gone otherwise. The clerk might not have been present at the college, or some paper might have been missing. We might even have missed the train. All that would have been misfortune.'

Shivkumar's and Ramnath's hearts fluttered with impatience as they wondered when they would reach home and begin going through their books. Ramnath had already set aside some old newspaper sheets to use as covers, for unless books were properly covered, their pages soon became soiled and there was always the risk of their being torn. The distance from the station to the village was only four kilometres, so they did not take long to return. Besides, it was the homeward hour.

As soon as he reached home, Shivkumar washed his hands and feet, removed his upper cloth, sat down on the bench in the verandah, and called out to his grandmother. The moment she came, he began showing her the books. Seeing them, Sumitra said, 'My boy, study with a full heart. This day has brought you to a turning point in your life. From here, the road ahead will open before you. At present, you bear no burden of the household or of any other kind. Your only task is to study. The harder you work now, the greater will be your reward.

'Your father too studied up to matriculation, and thus the presence of Saraswati entered this house to that extent. How long she remains here now depends upon you. God does no harm to anyone; He does good to all. Why should He do otherwise in your case? And think of Ramnath as your own true brother.'

Sumitra was still speaking to Shivkumar when Achhelal came in. The moment he arrived, he began saying,

'Bhouji, so many years have passed, but only today did I truly see Madhubani. Good heavens, what a vast market it is! Such large shops too! On the way there I could not look about properly, as we were in a rickshaw. But on the way back I saw everything clearly.

The college is enormous. So many teachers, so many students–I saw them all! While Bachelal was getting the boys admitted, I kept wandering about and looking at everything. Such great buildings! In one place I saw so many bicycles that they could not be counted.

'One man was sitting there, and he asked me, "Brother, do you take tobacco?" I thought to myself, why not sit a while and learn something, so I said yes. I went and sat beside him. The poor fellow had only one chair, which he himself occupied, so I sat on a low brick ledge nearby. We began talking. He told me that students from all the villages of the district come to study in that college.

'Ah, Bhouji, how much can I tell? There was so much to see that the mind itself cannot hold it all.' ❑

12

☰

A full year had passed since Devan came to Vikaspur, and it had been a good one. There had been neither too much rain nor too little. Had there been excess, there would have been flooding; had there been too little, there would have been drought. Such seasons come only rarely and largely by chance. For the truth is that, as far back as memory runs, time has always been thus. One year brings too much rain, another too little. Because the season had been favourable, the yield too was good, and so everyone's heart remained green with satisfaction.

Those four months alone, from Ashadh to Asin (July to october), held the key to the whole year. The remaining eight months, from Kartik to Jeth (Nov to June), seemed scarcely to count. Such had long been the condition of the farmer in Mithila.

Throughout the year, Devan continued learning the craft of farming from Nasivalal Kaka and putting it into practice. Nasivalal not only taught him the methods of cultivation but also supplied him with seeds and planting material. Through his guidance and support, Budhni's broken spirit revived, and she entered the new year with renewed cheer and confidence.

Budhni gathered more than a maund of fallen mangoes and prepared dried sour mango from them. She sold it to a travelling trader at five rupees a seer, earning two hundred rupees. With that money, Budhni, Devan, and Ramua all bought new clothes. The two mango trees had borne so abundantly that they not only ate to their fill but also sold enough fruit to earn three hundred rupees. She sold fifteen seers of dried mango as well, keeping five seers for the

household, some for occasional use and some for the festivals of Matrinavami and Jitiya.

To prepare phakua from the mango stones, she threw half onto the roofs of the two houses and kept the rest in the garden to sprout. Once the shoots emerged, she dug them up and replanted them in the garden, spacing them a hand's breadth apart. Within eight or nine months, they had grown to a cubit and a half or two cubits in height. By Baisakh, when the ground had hardened, the time came to transplant them properly.

Devan and Budhni cut back the tops of the saplings and uprooted them. They wrapped the roots in bundles of paddy straw. A trader from Madhubani, who had established a nursery, came and bought all six hundred saplings at five rupees each, bringing in three thousand rupees at one stroke. Devan also planted ten saplings for their own use.

Seeing such a handsome return, Budhni said to Devan, 'Son, have a hand-pump installed in that four-kattha field. You yourself said that Nasivalal Kaka had told you that however small the land may be, once there is water, both its dignity and its yield increase.'

The mango stones that had been left on the roof dried there. In Kartik, they brought them down. The two of them cracked each stone open on the grinding slab, setting the kernels aside and separating the shells. The shells were burnt in the hearth, while the kernels were ground into a fine paste and used to make rotis. Some kernels Devan cut into small pieces, like betel nut, and kept in an earthen vessel. Whenever he went out to work, he would tuck a few pieces into the fold at his waist and chew them as one chews betel nut.

The hand-pump was sunk at a cost of twelve hundred rupees. Even after that, eighteen hundred rupees still remained. Out of this sum, Budhni bought four kathas of land adjoining her own field at four hundred rupees per kattha. A further hundred and fifty rupees were spent on registration. Once the hand-pump had been installed, the way was opened to irrigate eight kathas of land for paddy.

In Ashadh, Budhni transplanted all fifteen kathas of her land. True, the ploughing and preparation had not been thorough, yet by the grace of timely sowing and a favourable season she obtained one and a half maunds of paddy per kattha. Had the field been properly

ploughed, puddled, levelled, and manured, the yield might have been more than double, but that was not the case. Even so, when she saw twenty-two and a half maunds of paddy before her, the hope of life awakened once more in her heart.

Since her husband's death, that hope had almost vanished. Had there not been the child, she might have taken poison or entered into a second marriage. But the yield from the field, together with the confidence born of her own labour, filled her heart again with a renewed desire to live.

The rains ended, and all the paddy was harvested by Asin and Kartik. Nasivalal Kaka had told Devan that anyone with little land should certainly practise vegetable cultivation. Accordingly, he sowed wheat on eleven kathas and reserved four kathas for vegetables.

The wheat grew well across all eleven kathas, but there was scarcely any hope of irrigation. In that entire embankment tract where Budhni's land lay, there was only one borewell, and it stood far from her field. There was neither channel nor pipe. Devan made every effort to irrigate the wheat, but failed. Then, by good fortune, a shower fell in Poush. As soon as the wheat absorbed that rainwater, it sprang up vigorously and tillered well. Heavy dew followed, and the moisture remained in the soil for many days. In that retained moisture, the crop filled out.

Seeing the wheat flourish, hope rose again in Budhni's heart. It had not been properly irrigated, yet it turned out reasonably well. By a rough estimate, each kattha yielded five or six paseris, giving a total of about six and a half maunds of wheat.

Nasivalal Kaka had also told Devan that horse gram sown in the dark fortnight of Chait would grow well. So within four days, the two of them prepared all eleven kathas and sowed kherhi. By mid-Jeth, the crop had begun to ripen. Budhni and Devan harvested it gradually, and by the end of Jeth the entire crop had been gathered.

As for the four kathas set aside for vegetables, Devan began preparing the land as soon as the paddy was harvested. By the middle of Kartik, the field was ready. Nasivalal Kaka had explained that vegetable cultivation requires water arrangements. Those with ponds use ponds; those with borewells use borewells. But what of someone

who has neither pond nor borewell nor hand-pump?

Here Nasivalal Kaka spoke from his own experience. He advised that if one dug two pits in four kathas and worked the field diligently, vegetable cultivation could still be managed.

Accordingly, after preparing the land, Devan dug two pits, one in each corner of the field. The labour was manageable, as one pit could be completed in two days. At a depth of six or seven hands, water began to seep in. The greater difficulty lay elsewhere. Vegetable cultivation does not require equal watering at all stages. Some crops need more water, others less.

The pits could never hold as much water as a borewell, that was true. Even so, by drawing water both morning and evening, he could irrigate about ten dhurs at a time. Over both pits, Devan fixed bamboo posts and set up two dhekuls so that water could be lifted for irrigation.

Devan pursued vegetable cultivation with two aims in mind: first, for the family's own use, and second, for income. For a householder, Kartik is a month of sacred duty, because the number of crops, vegetables, fruits, and spices sown in Kartik is greater than in any other month of the year. It is also the chief month for sowing spices. A household requires many things: grain, pulses, vegetables, fruits, spices, and more.

A salaried or trading household can earn money and meet its needs by purchasing whatever is required. But if a farmer does not produce such things himself, from where will they come? Reflecting thus, Devan resolved to cultivate everything. The larger the farmer, the more he could do; the smaller he was, the less. Yet if a farmer had ample land but was employed elsewhere, or lacked irrigation and alertness, he would inevitably fall behind. On the other hand, a farmer with skill and courage could progress even with limited means.

It has long been the good fortune of the region that ponds are regarded as acts of merit, and in earlier times many generous men had entire chains of ponds dug. There are even villages where the number of ponds exceeds eighteen. In addition, numerous rivers flow from north to south. The very layout of the villages is such that from one quarter to three quarters of their land is deep-lying chauri, which retains water until Jeth and Ashadh. Beyond this, there are borewells,

canals, and other sources of irrigation. The soil itself is rich. Mithila possesses an abundance of fertile earth. Though Lord Indra may sometimes withhold his favour, he is for the most part benevolent. Creatures and birds abound in such numbers that they seem ever ready to serve human life, dwelling within nature and sustaining it.

Holding firmly to Nasivalal Kaka's teachings, Devan devoted himself entirely to vegetable cultivation. For household use, he planted on one kattha all the necessary greens and vegetables, including radish, carrot, cabbage, potato, peas, tomatoes, and leafy greens such as spinach and bottle-gourd leaves. On ten dhurs he sowed spices and condiments: mustard, coriander, garlic, ajwain, fenugreek, chillies, and onions.

For income, he cultivated cabbage, tomatoes, and potatoes. By the time Phagun arrived, everything except the headed cabbages and tomatoes had already been harvested. Tomatoes had begun to be picked from Magh and still remained abundant even in Phagun.

With the income from vegetables, Budhni built a house. In truth, she had first wished to buy a bullock, but seeing the poor condition of the house, she changed her mind.

A full year had now passed since Devan came to Budhni's home. In that time, he had learnt much and even began to consider staying in Vikaspur for longer. Smiling, he said to Budhni, 'Didi, this is a fine village. How could it be otherwise, when there are men like Nasivalal Kaka, so wise, and farmers like Sajan, so honest and ever ready to help in times of need?'

Opening her heart, Budhni replied, 'My child, the day Ramua's father died, I felt that I too should die with him. I had no skill, no one to earn for us, and no path before me except suffering. How long could I have survived by selling the fields? Whenever I looked at Ramua, tears would come, and my body would grow weak with grief. Then it came to me that though Ramua was still small, in five years he would at least be able to do some work. Until then, I would manage somehow by pounding grain and grinding flour.

'Had I gone elsewhere or taken my own life, our entire family line would have ended. But after you came, and through the guidance and help of Nasivalal Kaka, it now seems that I shall indeed live with some happiness. The happiness that God once took away, He may

have taken. But the happiness that lies ahead, that surely He will still grant.'

The next morning, after breakfast, Devan said to Budhni, 'Didi, whatever seed and planting material Nasivalal Kaka gave us, add the proper increase and return it all to him. We must repay everything in full so that the road ahead may remain open. Otherwise he may think that Devan is dishonest.'

Hearing this, Budhni brought out paddy, wheat, and horse gram and placed them on the verandah. Devan counted and calculated, then tied the three together into a large bundle. As there was no seed left to return from the vegetables, he estimated their value and took money instead. Lifting the bundle onto his head, he set off for Nasivalal's house.

Nasivalal was sitting at the front, instructing his son. He said, 'My boy, a man's true strength is the essence of life. One must make proper use of this age by applying oneself to the work of the household. The more a man labours at this stage, the finer his life will become. And a fine life is the life of a noble human being.

'Whatever labour falls to your share, do not be miserly in it. By withholding effort, a man strays from the path of growth. Work honestly. And if you ever earn more than you need, then share it. The spirit of sharing is a great virtue. Once a man begins to share, the habit of hoarding does not take root in him. And one who gives freely, why should he covet another's goods? Greed belongs only to the man who desires to accumulate. If that desire never arises, greed has no path by which to enter.'

Nasivalal was still speaking when Devan arrived with the bundle. Seeing him, he smiled and said, 'Devan, I see you carry a large bundle. Have you come to take leave of Vikaspur today?'

Placing the bundle before him, Devan replied, 'Uncle, all this year I have taken many things from here. Today I have come to return them.'

Nasivalal said, 'Very well, sit down first. You have carried a heavy load, so rest a while. Then we shall speak.'

Devan sat and wiped the sweat from his body. He then went to the hand-pump, drank water, and returned. 'Uncle,' he said, 'by your

blessing, Budhni Didi's condition has improved greatly, and she now lives in contentment. I still have great hope from you. That is why I have come to repay what was taken. Whatever I take later, I shall return later.'

Nasivalal replied, 'My boy, did I give you a loan that you have come to repay it? I did only my duty, and you benefited from it. Take the bundle back. And do not let it enter your mind that I might stop helping you if I were displeased. Every human being has his own duty. To fulfil that duty is his dharma. That is what I have done. You too must fulfil yours. Just as I guided and helped you, so must you do for others.'

Devan lifted the bundle again and returned to Budhni's house. Seeing him come back with it, Budhni asked, 'My boy, why have you brought the bundle back?'

Setting it down, Devan replied, 'Didi, Uncle said he had not given it as a loan. He said he had only done his duty, and now we must do ours.'

Left alone at the front, Nasivalal sat thinking. For forty years he had lived in Vikaspur, always working and reflecting for the advancement of both himself and society. Through this, he had certainly progressed, yet society had not advanced as he had hoped. The question, though simple in appearance, was in truth a difficult one.

It was like throwing a small clod into a pond. Ripples arise, yet slowly they fade, and the water returns to its former stillness. Why does this happen? What unseen force within society quiets its movement and restores it to its old shape? ❑

13

After four years, Shivkumar took Honours in Mathematics and Ramnath in Geography. Both scored above seventy per cent in their respective subjects. The teaching at the college had also been of a high standard. Arun Kumar Dutt was the Principal, a well-known scholar of Mathematics. Dutt Sahib was not only a scholar but also an able administrator and a thoughtful guardian. He treated his students as though they were his own children. Whenever he saw a student in need, he helped generously. It was always his aim that the students of his college should study to the best of their ability. Unlike many others, he had no trace of caste prejudice.

After the results were published, Shivkumar and Ramnath went to meet him. The moment he saw them, he was greatly pleased. Smiling, he said, ‘My boys, you have now become worthy citizens of the country. The future of the nation rests upon people such as you. Therefore, fulfil with dedication and honesty the duties that belong to a responsible citizen. From family to society, and from society to the nation, the burden rests upon your shoulders. Bear it well. That is my blessing.’

At his words, tears of affection rose in the eyes of both boys. In a voice filled with emotion, Shivkumar folded his hands and said, ‘Sir, we shall strive all our lives to remain worthy of your blessing.’

Bachelal, Achhelal, and Sumitra sat together at the front, speaking of Shivkumar and Ramnath. Their hearts were full of happiness, yet no clear thought had arisen about what should come next. Bachelal said, ‘Uncle, the boys have now completed their B.A., but what should we do next?’

Without hesitation, Achhelal replied, ‘Son, I am an unlettered man. Matters of study are beyond me, so what can I say?’

Sumitra called both boys, and they came at once. When they had sat down, she said, ‘My boys, your education has brought great peace to my heart. When Bachelal’s father died, it was my wish to educate my son as far as possible. But we were in hardship from every side, and so I could take him only up to matriculation. Today, that wish has been fulfilled. Now that you are educated, the decision about what comes next must come from you.’

Shivkumar said, ‘Grandmother, yesterday Lalit Master told us that Marwari College in Darbhanga has been running a Teachers’ Training course for the past two years. It is a ten-month course. I feel I should take that training. Once I am trained, I shall surely find a position in a high school.’

Hearing this, something stirred in Bachelal’s mind. He fell silent and tried to recall it. After a moment, he remembered that five years earlier he had gone to Ghanshyampur during election time. There, Devi Datt Poddar, the Vice-Principal of Marwari College, had come as part of the campaign.

Devi Datt was a social worker and a man of uncommon character. Though a Marwari by community, he did not bear the usual traits associated with it. Moving from place to place, he came with four or five companions to the very spot where Bachelal was sitting. Their jeep had been left near the school, and they were walking through the village. He sat down beside Bachelal on the same bench.

Bachelal had heard his name but did not recognise him by sight. His manner was simple and unassuming. Though a Marwari, he spoke pure Maithili with remarkable fluency. No sooner had he sat down than he began to speak.

‘So long as there is no socialist rule in our country, a small number of wealthy capitalists will continue to exploit the poor majority and live in luxury. In 1947 we did gain independence, but it was not complete. It was a crippled freedom. Broadly speaking, the English merely stepped down from the throne of India. A country is governed by its laws and systems, and even now our system continues to operate under laws made by the English. Therefore, the poor must unite and change that order.’

He continued speaking, and then Bachelal asked, 'What is meant by socialism?'

It was as though the answer was already formed upon his tongue. The moment he heard the question, Devi Datt Poddar replied at once, 'Socialism means that the means of production belong not to individuals but to the collective. This includes land, mines, and factories. Even today, there are landlords who hold not hundreds or thousands, but lakhs of bighas of land. On the other hand, there are people who have not even enough land to build a house upon. The same is true of mines. Valuable resources are extracted from them, yet they remain in the hands of a few. The same applies to factories. In a single factory, lakhs of workers labour, but how much do they receive in wages?'

Having said this, he rose and added, 'At present I am occupied with election work, so I have little time.'

Bachelal stood up as well and asked his name and occupation. He replied, 'I am the Vice-Principal of Marwari College. If you ever have any work, come and meet me.'

Recalling all this, Bachelal drew a long breath and said to Shivkumar, 'My boy, this should be possible. Tomorrow, by the early train, I shall go to Darbhanga and make enquiries. When I return, I shall tell you how matters stand.'

The next morning, at dawn, Bachelal took the train to Darbhanga. By nine o'clock he arrived. As he had never visited the college before, he first went to a shop outside the station for breakfast and asked the shopkeeper for directions.

The shopkeeper said, 'You are from the countryside and may lose your way. It would be better to take a rickshaw. He will take you there.'

Bachelal followed his advice. The rickshaw driver left him at the college gate. By good fortune, Devi Datt Poddar arrived at that very moment. The two looked at one another, each feeling a faint recognition.

Bachelal said, 'I wish to meet Devi Datt Babu.'

He replied, 'What is the matter? I am he.'

Bachelal bowed and said, 'I wish to admit two students to the

Teachers' Training course.'

Devi Datt asked, 'Where are the students?'

Bachelal replied, 'I have come today only to make enquiries. If it is possible, I shall bring them tomorrow, fully prepared.'

Devi Datt said, 'Very well, it can be done. Come tomorrow without fail.'

At once, Bachelal returned to the station and caught the twelve o'clock train home. The next day he returned with both students and had their names entered.

At the end of ten months, both Ramnath and Shivkumar had become trained teachers. In the very high school where they had once studied, four teachers from the earlier batch retired within the space of a single month. The school lay in a remote rural area, and vacancies were announced to fill those posts. The notice appeared in the newspapers as well.

However, a change had come over the times. Young men no longer wished to remain in the atmosphere of the village. Most of the educated youth of the region had gone to Bombay, Calcutta, or Delhi, some working in factories, some in traders' shops, and some even pulling rickshaws in the streets of the city. In the villages, only the old and the children remained. As a result, farming families were gradually breaking apart and declining.

There were neither enough people to labour nor enough to practise agriculture in a modern way. Because of this, the wealth of the countryside was steadily diminishing. So long as educated and industrious people do not remain in the villages with determination, the uplift of the village will remain nothing more than an idea. Cities and markets are advancing vigorously on the strength of rural labour, while India, known as the land of villages, is rapidly slipping backwards.

Fifteen days before the appointments were to be made, the advertisement was published in the newspapers. The headmaster of the school knew that Shivkumar and Ramnath were trained, so he wrote a letter to Shivkumar and sent it through the school peon.

Subject

Dear pupil Shivkumar,

You will already be aware that four teachers in the school have retired. New appointments are to be made in their places. Therefore, both you and Ramnath should certainly apply.

You have both studied here, and the school is near your home. I cannot give an absolute assurance of appointment, as selections will be made by a committee. However, I can assure you that the process will be fair.

Yours faithfully,
Headmaster

On reading the headmaster's letter, Shivkumar felt confident that both he and Ramnath would be appointed. The very next morning, they went to the school with all their documents. They collected the forms from the office, filled them in, attached copies of their certificates, and submitted their applications.

The number of applications received was very small. The first applications were those of Shivkumar and Ramnath themselves. The slow response was due to the lack of educated people in the villages. Those from towns were unwilling to take up employment in rural areas.

Four days remained before the appointment date, and still there were only those two applications. The school secretary came and asked the headmaster, 'How many applications have been received so far?'

The headmaster did not know the exact number. He called the clerk, who confirmed that only two applications had been submitted. Both the headmaster and the secretary fell silent. The same question arose in their minds: with so much unemployment everywhere, why were so few applications being received? Yet neither spoke further.

On the final day, three more applications were received. As the date of appointment had already been fixed, the process went ahead as planned.

On the day of appointment, all the candidates appeared. A three-member committee had been formed, consisting of the headmaster, the secretary, and the District Education Officer.

Without any dispute or complication, the appointments were made. One candidate was untrained and was therefore not selected. The remaining four candidates received their appointment letters on the spot.

When Shivkumar reached home, he touched his grandmother's feet and told her everything. Ramnath also bowed and stood quietly nearby. Sumitra said to him, 'My son Ramu, the happiness I feel on seeing you is beyond measure. Shiv has a father who is a schoolmaster, but you have risen like a mango tree in barren land.' ❑

14

As soon as Shivkumar found employment, Bachelal went and submitted his resignation at the school. The moment he resigned, the whole village began discussing it. Some felt regret, because he had often helped people with money in times of need. Others, however, were quietly pleased, as at least one source of his income had now ceased.

Sumitra, however, felt neither surprise nor delight. She understood clearly that a person's capacity to earn is far greater than what any single job can provide, and that no job lasts for life. A man remains in service only so long as he retains his strength. Once the body begins to weaken, the job slips away. After retirement, the pension is often less than half the former salary, and at that very stage of life the body demands better food and medicine. When income declines, those needs cannot be met, and life becomes burdensome. Because such people never learn the ways of managing a household independently, they are left to live in weakness and dependence.

Then arises the question: where should one work? Either under the government or under private employers. It is said that in a democracy the government belongs to the people, and therefore cooperation becomes necessary for the system to function. Yet if the government serves only a small number of people, while the majority are left to struggle, then in what spirit can one truly cooperate with such a system?

There is also the question of factory labour. Is the condition of those who work in mills and factories very different from servitude? If a citizen of a free country must still live like a slave, then what

meaning does freedom hold? And if a country that calls itself a land of villages allows rural wealth to stagnate or decline, then what remains of national progress except an illusion?

What is needed, therefore, is proper care and organisation of rural resources such as land, ponds, and rivers, both through government support and through the labour of the villagers themselves. But who is to do it? If those who belong to the villages abandon them and move towards the towns, how can such change come about? It was after reflecting deeply on these questions that Bachelal decided to resign.

It was evening. As it was only the third night of the dark fortnight, there was some darkness, though not complete. Bachelal was returning home from the fields carrying a bag with a wrench and hammer. Behind him, Achhelal carried the plastic irrigation pipe and a hoe.

As it grew late, Ruma stood near the verandah, looking down the road towards the south. Seeing Bachelal ahead and Achhelal behind, she stepped forward and said, 'God must be very pleased with us. One of us spends the day plastering cow-dung cakes, and the other staining his hands and body with diesel and engine oil.'

Hearing this, Achhelal burst out laughing but said nothing. Smiling, Bachelal replied, 'If God were not pleased, He would not have given us such skill for living and such strength for work. Only the truly industrious can turn work into something joyful.'

Talking in this way, they reached the front of the house. They set down their tools, took soap, and went to the hand-pump to bathe. Sumitra lit the lantern and hung it on the stand. Ruma went to prepare tea. By the time Bachelal had bathed and returned, the tea was ready. She brought it out and set it before him. Achhelal too had bathed and returned, and the three of them sat together, drinking tea.

After taking one sip, Bachelal said to Ruma, 'It is by working in just this way that a family moves forward. Look, in the time it took me to bathe, you made the tea. Mother lit the lantern. In ten minutes, so much work was done. If all of us had gone about it lazily and at our own sweet pace, how much time would it have taken?'

Ruma took away the three glasses and went into the courtyard to cook. Achhelal began mixing tobacco. Bachelal was just speaking

to his mother about irrigation when Gonar arrived and sat down beside Achhelal. Achhelal took some tobacco for himself and offered some to Gonar as well.

Taking the tobacco into his mouth and looking at Achhelal, Gonar said, 'Brother, from this year onward our troubles are over.'

Achhelal, eager to know why, asked at once, 'How so?'

Gonar said, 'Brother, for as long as I can remember, the riverside field had never yielded as much paddy as it did this year. The plot is twelve kathas, and never before had it given more than fifteen maunds. But this year it yielded twelve quintals. It was a field that used to lie fallow from Phagun to Ashadh. Cowherds and buffalo-herdsmen would graze cattle there, and the boys would play gulli-danda. And now it has yielded so much that the whole year's provision is secured. My wife says that Lakshmi herself entered the house this year. So we shall offer a feast of flattened rice and curd to five holy men.'

Gonar had barely finished speaking when people from the hamlet began arriving one after another. Just as laughter and joking go on in a wedding party, so they all began in the same spirit among themselves. Once the laughter subsided, each man in turn began speaking of the work he had done throughout the day. Each recounted his own encouraging labour in his own words, laughing himself and making the others laugh as well.

When all had finished speaking, Bachelal asked the gathering, 'What plans have you made for what comes next?'

At Bachelal's question, Dhanikalal said, 'Brother, I have brought a new variety of paddy seed from my maternal uncle's village. I saw the threshing there with my own eyes. My cousin weighed it and said that four kathas had yielded six quintals of paddy.'

Gonar asked, 'What does the paddy look like?'

Dhanikalal replied, 'The grains are long, very slender, bright, and white. They are fragrant too.'

'And how is the cooked rice?'

'Ah, brother, the moment the plate is set before you, its aroma rises at once. I myself ate rice from the freshly harvested grain, and

even then, what can I say?'

'How much seed did you bring?'

'I brought only five kilos. That will sow five kathas. Next year I shall give seed to everyone.'

'You will sow it in only one field. But if you give two bundles each to people from the other tracts as well, then it can be tested elsewhere too. Not every variety of paddy thrives equally well in every kind of soil. That would become clear as well.'

Dhanikalal said, 'You have spoken well. If, by giving ten bundles of seed, the yield can be tested in all the different tracts, that will be all the better.'

Once irrigation became available in the village, the very shape of village life began to change. A new enthusiasm arose among the farming households. Agriculture, once uncertain, began to move towards stability. Water, however, is only one element in cultivation. Good seed, manure, better tools for ploughing and preparing the land, and knowledge of improved farming methods still remained to be acquired. Yet, through the arrival of this single resource alone, yields increased twofold and threefold, and with this, affection among the farming community also grew. Curiosity about agriculture deepened. The farmer whose poverty had never allowed even a smile to rise to his face now began to wear one constantly.

By the time they had finished eating and drinking, it was night. Seeing the front of the house empty, Shivkumar and Ramnath came there. On seeing the two boys, Bachelal asked, "My sons, do your hearts truly remain in your studies?"

Both replied, "Yes."

Pleased with them, Bachelal said, "My sons, never let it enter your minds that you teach merely because you receive a salary. Think of every child as your own younger brother and teach in that spirit. Keep constant watch over how the children are learning. A child's life stands at the same stage as the rising sun at dawn. If clouds gather at sunrise, even the day begins to feel like night. Therefore, with whatever strength you possess, do not allow even the slightest slackness in your teaching.

"Until now, the two of you have been walking along a single

footpath, but you have now reached a crossroads. From this point onward, you must look in all four directions as you proceed. The first duty is the honest discharge of your professional responsibilities. The second is your family. The third is your parents. The fourth is society. Alongside all this, there is also your own continued education. You have become high school teachers today, but does that mean you should stop there? If you obtain higher qualifications, you may become college lecturers as well. In life, one should strive to move forward continuously. Only those who keep progressing come to understand the true value of life.

"I too was once a teacher. Then I resigned from the school and devoted myself fully to family life. Yet I am no less content now than I was before. I am learning new skills and living life with renewed enthusiasm. Even so, one shortcoming has remained in my life to this day, and that is travel. To travel and see the world is also of great importance in life. Without travelling, how can one truly understand the world? How else can we know what kinds of people live in different places, how they live, and what sort of lives they lead? Only through travel can such things be understood.

"India is a land of countless mountains, plateaus, lakes, islands, seas, waterfalls, forests, and diverse terrains. It is a country enriched by civilisations and cultures ranging from the ancient to the modern. How can all this be understood without being seen? From those who dwell in the mountains to those who live by the sea, in a land adorned with fruits and flowers of countless colours, how can anyone understand it without seeing it? Therefore, travelling through the country is as essential as the other necessities of life. What time has passed will never return, but in whatever time remains, I shall try, as far as possible, to fulfil that wish." ❑

Final Stage

☰

It was the month of Phagun (March). The entire character of the weather had changed. Because of storms rising from the sea, clouds hung low, as they do in the month of Sawan (August), and the wind blew continuously. At times there was a light drizzle, and the wind rose and fell by turns. At other moments, heavy rain fell, accompanied by strong gusts, so that everyone began to shiver as though it were winter. Observing the mood of the season, people set aside all work in the fields and groves and remained occupied only with the immediate needs of the house and courtyard. Some lit dung fires and warmed themselves, while others lay wrapped in shawls.

Devan sat reflecting on why such weather should occur in a month like Phagun. Even the seasons, it seemed, could not be trusted. Just as people themselves cannot be relied upon, saying one thing and doing another, so too even God seemed uncertain. Why, he wondered, should the weather turn like this in so beautiful a month as Phagun? From where had so much wind been gathered that, although it had already blown and blown towards the west, it still had not been exhausted? Think of all the hopes with which people had sown peas, gram, khesari, and other crops, and had now uprooted them and spread them from courtyard to threshing floor for drying. This rain would rot them all. Neither husk fit for cattle nor grain fit for human consumption would remain. The grain would continue soaking and spoiling in the rain. And the slight winter chill that had already passed would return once more.

Then another thought arose in his mind. After all, it was not he who had planted khesari and peas. For wheat, it was as though gold

were raining down. This year not a single grain would be blighted. Nasivalal Kaka's judgement had been right, that one should grow Kartik paddy, wheat, and khesari in the same field. The moisture of Phagun had gladdened the heart. Eight days from then, the wheat would be cut, and khesari could be sown at once. It would sprout abundantly, as though in an irrigated field. Even scattered seed would germinate. But the onions would suffer. Only yesterday the field had been watered, and now such rain had fallen that for fifteen days the land would not dry sufficiently to be worked, and so the onions would rot. But what could be done? A person acts according to their best understanding, yet who can prevent the unforeseen?

Devan sat alone on the verandah of the cattle shed, thinking all this over. There was only one house, one half used for tethering the cattle and the other made into a front sitting place. Seeing Devan sitting there alone, Budhni came and sat beside him. As soon as she had sat down, Devan said, "Didi, I shall remain only six months more. Eleven years and six months have already passed. From the day I came until now, let us together reckon what work has been done and what still remains."

At the thought that Devan would not remain, Budhni felt a shock in her heart. Saddened, she said, "My child, in finding you, I found everything. How many people like me wander and collapse until they die? But you gave life not only to me, you preserved my entire household and lineage..."

Budhni was still speaking to Devan when Sajan arrived, wrapped in a shawl. Seating him on the bench, Devan asked, "Brother, what work have you been doing? I see mud and slush all over your hands and feet."

Sajan replied, "My boy, what shall I tell you? I had stored straw to roof the cattle shed, and that too was drenched. The house roof leaked badly as well. The cloth covering over the bullock's body was soaked through, so I removed it and spread a dry sack over him instead. Water had collected in the stall, and I was clearing it out. That is the mud you see."

Half veiling her face, Budhni smiled and said, "Brother, just as your bullocks have grown stout, so too has Didi here grown stout."

Hearing Budhni's words, Sajan was pleased, though inwardly

he wondered why she had said such a thing. After a brief silence, he said, “Daughter, the thought has crossed my mind as well, whether Didi is truly growing stout or merely swelling. I cannot speak of other matters, but she eats a great many potatoes. It is as though the potatoes themselves are quietly working some small magic.”

Changing the subject, Budhni said, “Today I have been greatly troubled. Rain at such an untimely moment, and not a single dry stick in the house. How am I to cook? Even the dung cakes are up on the rack, and those I had carefully dried for cooking have all been soaked through.”

Sajan said, “The same happened with us. But one dry log remained, so I split it and placed it by the hearth. I told my wife, ‘Today, make khichdi and mashed potatoes. If possible, we shall prepare mustard chutney as well.’”

Budhni asked, “How is mustard chutney made?”

“You do not know? It makes a very fine chutney. Take mustard according to the number of people. Add garlic in the same proportion. If there is a citron lemon, so much the better; if not, an ordinary lemon will do. Add salt and chillies to taste. Grind the mustard, garlic, salt, and chillies together thoroughly, then squeeze in the lemon. That is all, the chutney is ready.”

“Ah, then that is a chutney for everyday use!”

Bringing their conversation to a pause, Devan said, “Brother, as the three of us are here together, I will speak plainly. It has now been eleven and a half years since I came here. As soon as six months more have passed, I shall leave. I have told you both now because, had I gone away without saying anything, it would have remained like a thorn in your hearts.”

Praising Devan, Sajan said, “In finding you, this poor woman found everything. She has regained her fields and land, her cattle, and her home. Ramua, too, has now grown old enough to marry. As far as I can see, that alone is the one task still left undone.”

At Sajan’s words, Devan said, “Brother, that too is in my thoughts, but my mind is troubled and uncertain. Girls from different regions have different customs, habits, and ways of life. So from which region should one seek a match? That is a very weighty

question. True, some things are changing now that a new wind has begun to blow through society. Yet even now, in the countryside, seventy to eighty per cent remains as it was before."

"In our region, marriage alliances extend eastward as far as Bhagalpur, westward to Muzaffarpur, southward to the Ganga belt, and northward into the Tarai of Nepal. However, this is not equally true for every caste. Among Rajputs and Bhumihars, marriage ties are more often directed towards the west and south, into the Bhojpuri and Magahi speaking regions. As a result, the local language comes strongly under their influence. With brides from those regions, both speech and customs enter the household. Similarly, among Brahmins, kinship often extends towards Bhagalpur, and so the local speech and Bhagalpur style manners also find their way in.

"But among the backward castes, kinship is more often formed with the Tarai of Nepal and with Allapur, Dharampur, Pachhai, Nare Digar, and Bhaur parganas. The speech and manners of Pachhai are far better than those of Allapur and the Nepal Tarai. However, the truly hardworking girls come from Allapur, Nepal, and the Kosi region, not from Pachhai, Nare Digar, or Bhaur. Therefore, for poorer families, Allapur, the Kosi belt, and Nepal are the more suitable regions."

Listening attentively to Devan, Budhni smiled and said, "My parental home lies in the Bhaur pargana. Before my gauna, while I was still in my father's house, I did no work except cutting grass, nor did I learn any other skill. Yes, my mother taught me household tasks such as plastering, sweeping, preparing grain bins, setting the hearth, and cooking. But the skill by which life is truly sustained is the ability to earn, and that I never learnt. Here, however, I see that women from Allapur are extraordinarily industrious. Except for ploughing itself, there is no task whose skill they do not possess."

Hearing Budhni's words, Sajan nodded and said, "Daughter, in our homes we need a daughter in law who can truly work and earn."

Budhni replied, "Yes, brother. Just look at Dhoreba Kaka. Out of greed for gifts and dowry, he brought home such a delicate and ornamental daughter in law that there is constant discord in that house. I shall not bring such a daughter in law. I have no desire for

dowry. Let the daughter in law be hardworking."

Four months passed, and Ramua was married. The daughter in law Budhni received was just as she had wished. Even so, people in the community continued to taunt her, saying, "Never in any wedding feast had we been served such poor fare. The way they fed us was one thing, and for sleeping they gave us reed planks and pillows stuffed with paddy straw knots. But the curd they served us, such curd we had never tasted in our lives."

The day after tomorrow, twelve full years would be completed for Devan. On one side was the pull of a society advancing through economic growth, and on the other the longing to see the world. Together, these gave rise to a deep conflict in his mind. Arguing within himself, he arrived at this conclusion: the process of economic growth was indeed underway in the village, but the desire to see the world belonged to intellectual growth, and that too was a form of development. Without intellectual growth, economic progress cannot remain on the right path. Economic advancement can rise only as high as the mind itself rises. Beyond that point, the development of life becomes obstructed. How far humanity, society, and the world will advance can only be conjectured at present, and such conjectures may prove either right or wrong. Therefore, seeing the world is essential.

Just as Devan's mind yearned restlessly for intellectual growth, so too the comforts of economic well being attracted him physically. From childhood until only recently, he had known neither a full stomach's worth of food, nor sufficient clothing, nor the comfort of a proper house, nor the security of a dependable life.

Between these two pulls, Devan's mind and body were tugged in different directions, now inclining one way, now another. Yet the resolve of life makes a person steadfast in principle.

As soon as this thought took shape in his mind, Devan resolved firmly that he would leave Budhni's house. It also occurred to him that, before leaving Vikaspur, it was necessary to meet Nasivalal Kaka. For it was after finding him that he had spent twelve happy years in the village, not only passing the time, but gaining much experience and learning a great deal besides.

The next morning, after rising, Devan set out for Nasivalal's

house. Having fed the cow and washed his hands, Nasivalal came out and sat on the bench at the front, reflecting to himself: a person may study extensively and become prosperous, and their family and country may also prosper, but does peace truly enter life through that alone? Will one human being then begin to regard another as truly human? Will crime disappear from among people? Will the appetite for indulgence cease?

Many such questions continued to arise in Nasivalal's mind. Whenever he began to reflect deeply on one, several others would emerge in succession. Today, America is the richest and most educated country in the world. Many other nations borrow from it and pursue their development. But is there no theft in America? No robbery, no violence, no murder, no violation of women? Are there no beggars there? Is every human being treated with dignity, or are some regarded as less than human? Is the honour of women truly secure?

The further his thoughts wandered, the more Nasivalal felt lost in a forest of problems. He could see no clear path, nor could he find one. To steady himself, he took out lime and tobacco from his small box and began to mix them. He placed the prepared tobacco in his mouth. As his mind refused to settle, he rose and began to pace. While pacing, he lifted his face to spit and noticed Devan approaching. The moment he saw him, a thought arose within him: how many children like this must perish each day, and who can count them? Yet gratitude stirred in him for this one, who lives with such cheer and determination. Now he is a young man. Now that strength has awakened within him by which something meaningful may be done.

While Nasivalal was still absorbed in these thoughts, Devan approached, touched his feet, and bowed. Blessings stirred in Nasivalal's heart, while his eyes seemed to read the life within Devan. Neither spoke. Each remained absorbed in his own world. Devan's heart awaited a final blessing, while Nasivalal contemplated the maturity that had come upon him.

With a stirred mind and an unsteady heart, Devan said, "Kaka, tomorrow I shall leave this village. So today I have come to receive your final blessing."

Nasivalal replied, "My boy, how can I give you a final blessing

now? You still have a long life ahead, and I am not about to die. People have divided the one world into fragments, into countries, provinces, villages, and hamlets. Yet the earth is one. Somewhere upon this same earth you will live, and somewhere upon it I too shall live. Wherever you may be, or wherever I may be, I shall still see you, and you too shall still see me."

Interrupting him, Devan said, "Kaka, the blessing I seek is for the body, for this worldly separation. For twelve years we have lived together in one place. Now we shall live apart for a while. It is for that small parting that I ask your blessing."

Hearing Devan's words, Nasivalal smiled and said, "Is a blessing something that comes merely from the mouth? It is an outpouring of the heart. Do you imagine that you will ask for a blessing and I shall hand it to you like a sacred offering? Since you have already prepared yourself for tomorrow, you will surely go. But remain here today. First eat and drink. Let us speak freely to our hearts' content. Then, in the evening, you may go."

Budhni was still asleep, and the whole village lay quiet. Before sunrise, Devan rose and set out northward. The clothes he wore were all he carried. He took nothing to eat, nor anything else. The hunger for knowledge had taken such hold of him that he gave no thought to anything else. Yet the art of living, that he had indeed learnt.

When he reached the edge of the village, Devan began to reflect: he had seen the village and the home, and he had also seen the people who lived within them. Now he should go towards the places of the divine. As soon as this thought arose, he set off towards the holy places. But as he went further, he saw hundreds of temples, mosques, and churches. Seeing this, he became bewildered. How much could he possibly see? If he were to stop and examine everything, it would take years, and how long is a human life? Standing still, Devan decided that he would observe the smaller places as he passed along the road, but the greater ones he would enter and see from within.

A soft wind blew gently. The sun was not yet harsh, yet the long walk had wearied him. By the roadside stood a tree with a wide and dense crown. He looked at it carefully but could not identify its kind. Beneath it, the grass grew thick and green, fresh and inviting. It

occurred to him that although he must continue his journey, he might rest there for a while.

Devan sat beneath the tree. After only a short while, his limbs began to relax, and he lay down upon the grass. As soon as he lay down, sleep overtook him. He had not slept long when he suddenly awoke. His sleep had broken. At once, two opposing thoughts arose within him. One said: I am tired, let me rest fully. The other said: if I spend my time only in sleep, what shall I ever see?

He rose to his feet. Looking ahead, everything appeared blurred. He rubbed his eyes with both hands and cleared his vision. At once, he could see distinctly again. Yet everything seemed altered. Just as rice becomes cooked rice, and milk turns into curd, so too he perceived the whole world moving rapidly in transformation.

Standing there, Devan watched. One man ran blindly towards a ditch, another towards a thicket of thorns, another towards fire, and yet another towards a garden in full bloom. A conflict arose in Devan's mind. His first thought was this: unless one falls into the ditch, how can one truly know it? Unless one enters the fire, how can one understand its heat?

Then another thought followed: if I fall into the ditch, how shall I climb out? And if I leap into the fire, how shall I survive? If I perish, how shall I ever see the world?

Caught in uncertainty, Devan sat down once more. As he sat, another thought arose in his mind: is life found upon the road of death, or death upon the road of life? Is sorrow hidden along the path to happiness, or happiness along the path to sorrow? Is virtue concealed within the path of sin, or sin within the path of virtue?

Strange questions continued to arise in Devan's heart. When one plucks a rose, the thorn pierces the hand. When one walks along a road, one may slip and fall. But does anyone stop plucking roses for fear of thorns? Does anyone stop walking because they might stumble? Such thoughts persisted in his mind. Behind life itself, death walks always like a shadow. Yet behind all things stands resolve.

Whoever truly resolves to pluck a rose does not concern himself with the thorn. Whoever enters the fire to understand its nature does not fear being scorched. In the same way, since he too carried within him the resolve to see the world, he would continue

walking for as long as he lived, no matter how difficult the road might be. As soon as this thought settled in his mind, Devan rose again and continued on his way.

He took the northern road. After walking a short distance, he came upon a forest of thorns. Seeing it, Devan wondered how he could possibly pass through it. There was no clear path. Yet, on closer inspection, he noticed that although there was no broad road, a narrow footpath had been worn by cattle and herdsmen passing to and fro. Then he looked at himself. He realised that he too possessed nothing but his own body. At once, confidence arose within him that he could cross. So he moved forward.

After going a little farther, he saw that the thorn forest stretched long from east to west, but was not very wide. He crossed it.

He had eaten nothing along the way, and now hunger began to trouble him. But what food could be found in such a forest?

Suppressing his hunger, he continued onward. Advancing further, he came upon another forest. In this one there were tall trees, but no thorns. It was a forest of fruit, filled with wild trees of many kinds.

With cautious curiosity, Devan examined the trees. Seeing them laden with fruits of many colours, his mind grew calm. In that calmness, he thought: I have only just entered a small forest, and already such bright and varied fruits appear before me. If I go further still, I shall surely find fruits greater and finer than these. Therefore, if I desire the greater fruit, I must pass beyond this smaller grove and continue onward.

Then another thought arose: what if, instead of advancing, I regress and lose even what I already have? What if all sweetness turns to ruin? But no. In life, attainment comes in two forms. One is the attainment of things, and the other is the attainment of understanding. At times, one may gain both together; at others, one gains only understanding, not the thing itself. Therefore, one should never be anxious about whether something will be gained or not. A person must continue to act, lifting each step forward with unwavering eagerness.

And in life, whom shall we call defeated and whom victorious?

The struggle between darkness and light continues endlessly within a person. If darkness is overcome in one form, it returns in another, often stronger than before. Even something as radiant as the sun is, at times, veiled in darkness.

Among us, there is also a powerful illusion that what is done in a previous birth is received in this one. Yet even this idea may be understood in two ways. First, the ‘previous birth’ as one form changing into another in the process of development. Second, the earlier phase of this very life. Just as the earlier phase of an officer is that of a student, so too the earlier phase of a doctor is that of a student. However, it is the first notion that is commonly accepted among us, and thus it becomes a powerful delusion.

The more Devan reflected, the more his mind grew dense and muddled, like churned buttermilk. Irritated, he rose and moved on. Yet as soon as he began walking, his irritation faded. A new energy coursed through his body. Lifting his resolve high, he stepped forward with courage.

The hunger of his body had subsided, but the hunger of his mind continued to grow. After walking some distance, he saw a large mango tree standing to the left of the road. It bore fruit in all stages, from raw to half ripe to fully ripe, and many had fallen to the ground below. Standing beneath the tree, Devan wondered whether it was a wild tree or one planted by human hands. He looked around carefully. As he did so, a story his father had once told him came back to mind.

His father had not owned even a single dhur of land on which he might plant an orchard or a row of grafted trees. He had neither the means to go on pilgrimage nor the knowledge of ritual worship. Yet acts of merit belong to everyone. And so, he had once planted five mango trees by the roadside.

Might this tree too have been planted by such a man? Picking up five ripe mangoes, Devan sat upon a raised root and began to eat. The mangoes were delicious. After finishing them, he decided to remain there for the day. He wiped his hands on the grass and his mouth with his hands. There was no need even for water.

Alone, Devan lay down in the shade of the tree. Above him, birds of many colours pecked at the ripe mangoes, chattering among themselves, snatching from one another, playing, and making merry.

Though the birds were of many colours, each sat upon its own branch, as if speaking of its own life. Lying on his back, Devan watched them, and gradually, forgetting all that lay before and behind him, he entered their world.

As the sun's rays faded, birds from other trees began to gather there. As though guided by instinct, each took its place. For a while, while the air remained clear, they continued their chatter. Then, as darkness spread, they gradually fell silent. By the third watch of the evening, all the birds were still. To Devan, that tree seemed like a wish fulfilling tree. New thoughts and new ways of living began to arise in his mind. Wandering thus in thought, he did not realise when sleep overtook him.

At dawn, a small bird awoke. As soon as it stirred, it began to rouse the others. Gradually, the light spread, and the birds awoke one by one. As soon as they were awake, they flew off to their daily tasks. Watching them depart, Devan too rose. Standing up, he looked over himself. There was no water nearby with which to wash, so he merely wiped his eyes and ears with his hands and set off again.

The road was uneven, rising in places and dipping in others, straight at times and winding at others, here deep and there broken. Lost in thought, Devan walked on swiftly. There was no shortage of animals along the road, yet not a single human being. Even so, there was neither doubt nor fear in his mind. Alone, he continued onward.

After walking some distance, Devan saw what appeared to be a market. A sense of relief arose within him at the thought that he would at last meet people. But it was no market, only a small township. Modest trade was taking place there. Houses stood on both sides of the road, some of the older kind, others neat and smartly kept. The people were much the same. Yet most seemed bound by rigid habits of mind. Some clung to old orthodoxies, others to new ones. Although all were equally constrained by such fixities, there was no harmony among them. Each criticised the other, saying, "You are wrong. No, you are wrong."

Keeping to the road, Devan walked on, observing the conduct of the people. After a while, he noticed a large temple beneath a great peepal tree. In front of it stood a dharamshala where travellers could stay, with arrangements for food and drink. Surrounding the temple

was a flower garden, filled with plants and trees of many kinds, bearing blossoms of many colours.

At first, Devan stood on the road and looked from a distance. Then it occurred to him that he should enter and see it properly. Like a stranger, he stepped inside. Beside the path stood a well, with a bucket hanging from a lifting frame, fastened by an iron chain. Going to the well, Devan drew water, washed his hands and feet, sprinkled some over his body, then drew another bucket and drank.

Afterwards, he made his way towards the temple.

On the verandah, one man stood fanning Mahantji with a large palm leaf fan. Another massaged his outstretched feet with mustard oil, while a third kneaded his arms, rubbing them with oil. Mahantji lay with his eyes closed, immersed in comfort.

Seeing him, Devan thought that he appeared every inch a well established holy man. His body resembled the solid trunk of an ancient tree, his thighs like those of an elephant, and his belly like a heavy sack. His whole body was flushed with fullness. His beard and hair were long and thick. Dozens of incense sticks burned together nearby, and bottles of scent and fragrant oil stood on the window ledge beside him. It occurred to Devan that, since he had come this far, he might as well take darshan and offer his greeting.

Stepping forward, he took darshan and offered Mahantji a respectful greeting while standing. Hearing this, Mahantji opened his eyes. Fixing his gaze upon Devan, he began to fume inwardly. Why had the man not bowed and touched his feet?

Devan, however, was of an independent mind. He thought to himself that he had no wish to remain anywhere that demanded flattery. He was merely a traveller, passing along the road, and would soon move on.

While Mahantji continued to seethe in silence, Devan turned and walked out. Then Mahantji called to the temple priest and said, “A pilgrim came just now. He looked like a rogue to me. Turn him out at once.”

Hearing the order, the priest began searching for Devan.

Meanwhile, Devan was walking through the flower garden surrounding the temple, observing it from place to place.

The priest, glancing into the dharamshala, asked an odd looking holy man there, "Did a stranger come here just now?"

The man stared blankly at him and, not understanding, replied, "Whoever came has already gone. There is no new person here now. I myself arrived only the day before yesterday, and all the others have been here longer."

At once, the priest returned to Mahantji and said, "He has gone."

Meanwhile, Devan was in the flower garden, examining the flowers one by one. Some were fragrant, others without scent. Some were native, others foreign. After surveying the entire garden, he turned his attention to the peepal tree standing behind the temple.

The tree appeared very old. Its branches were thick and massive, and it rose to a great height. Yet one half of it was dry, while the other remained green. Devan began to wonder why it should be so, half dead and half alive. He fell into deep perplexity. Turning the matter over in his mind, he went to examine the roots. Even there, one side seemed lifeless while the other still lived.

Resting his hand against his face, Devan stood thinking. After a while, it occurred to him that perhaps a borer or grub was feeding at the roots. As soon as this thought arose, he took up a sturdy dry stick and began digging around them. He had scarcely dug a few inches when he saw a thick grub gnawing within the hollow of the tree. The sight filled him with sudden satisfaction. At once, he drew the grub out with the stick and flung it aside. The moment it fell to the ground, a crow swooped down, seized it, flew to the temple dome, and ate it there.

Devan then resumed digging at the roots. But the soil was hard, and the trunk itself unyielding, so the stick would scarcely penetrate. At last, wearied, he gave up. He went to the well, washed the mud from his hands and feet, then returned and sat in the dharamshala.

After a while, the cook arrived and began counting those seated there. Devan remained entirely unconcerned. There was not the slightest anxiety in him. Turning to the baba beside him, a man with long hair and beard, he asked, "How long have you been a baba?"

Seeing Devan's face, the baba began to speak.

“My boy, you are in the full strength of youth. Yet since you have asked, I shall tell you. I belong to a householder’s family. I have four sons. I married them all and settled them. They all have children now. Then my wife died. The four sons divided the land equally among themselves, and they kept me in common. For the first year, all went well. Each fed me for three months in turn. But as soon as the second year began, everything changed. Not one of them would feed me. For a few days, I ate with relatives and well wishers, and I told them of my sons’ conduct. Those good people went and spoke to them again and again, but it had no effect. The heart clings to one’s home when one leaves it, but what could I do? I joined a wandering baba from the village, and moving from place to place, I have now come here.”

Devan asked, “How long will you remain here?”

“For as long as they allow me to stay. When they drive me out, I shall go elsewhere.”

Devan fell silent. Yet many questions began to arise in his mind. He rose and went to sit beside the well. Leaning against its parapet, he reflected that such a condition had not come upon this poor man alone. It existed in every village. Society would have to confront such a problem, not merely think about it, but act to resolve it. In village after village there are helpless women, helpless men, and the lame and disabled, living out their days in a kind of living death. Therefore, for such people, proper arrangements must be made within every village.

Devan’s mind became entangled in these thoughts. Thinking and thinking, he lay down there. He did not even eat.

At midnight, the wind began to roar. As it whistled and sharpened, Devan felt the cold creeping into his body. The chill broke his sleep. As soon as he awoke, he rose from beside the well and went to sit in a corner of the dharamshala. The wind grew stronger and stronger. Devan stepped outside and looked up at the sky. At a glance, he knew that a storm was about to break. He thought it better to remain outside than within the dharamshala, and so he returned and sat once more upon the lower edge of the well.

Mahantji and the priest slept inside the temple. The cold wind deepened their sleep, for the temple was enclosed on three sides, with

only one side open. They lay snoring heavily. As chance would have it, Mahantji turned in his sleep, and his left hand came to rest upon his chest. A dream took hold of him. In it, he saw himself riding in a chariot on his way to heaven. It was a celestial chariot, drawn by powerful horses. Apsaras danced around him, while messengers of the heavenly realm moved before and behind in attendance.

At that very moment, a fierce storm arose. Mahantji sank deeper into sleep. In the storm, the dry half of the peepal tree behind the temple broke and fell upon it. Though the tree had long been dry to its roots, the roots themselves had not split. It broke slightly above the base. It was a vast branch. As it struck the temple, the dome shattered first, and then the entire structure collapsed. The temple was old, and it did not take long to fall.

Mahantji slept so deeply that he understood nothing of the collapse. Beneath lay Mahantji and the priest, above them the fallen roof of the verandah, and above that the great branch of the tree. Only when everything had come crashing down upon him did his sleep break. But what use was waking then? His body was crushed beyond repair. Only his breath still lingered. After a short while, even that ceased. Both men lost their lives. Still, the storm did not abate. On other days, such storms would come and pass quickly, but this one raged for a long time.

The dharamshala stood a little apart from the temple. Open on all four sides, it allowed the gusts to pass through it. It did not collapse and remained standing. Sitting by the well, Devan witnessed everything, yet he neither cried out nor moved. The storm passed, but no rain or hail accompanied it.

As soon as the storm ended, those in the dharamshala came out and raised an alarm that the temple had fallen and that Mahantji and the priest were buried beneath it. But the storm had not struck that place alone. Everyone was occupied with his own damaged homes and courtyards, and so no one came to help.

At first light, Devan wished to depart. Then it occurred to him that before leaving, it would be proper to take one last look at Mahantji. So he remained. Yet in the dim light, the branch had not been removed from the fallen roof, nor had Mahantji been taken out from beneath it. The branch was too large for a few men to move

aside. It would have to be cut with an axe. And how could that be done in the dark? Beneath the branch lay the temple roof, and beneath the roof lay Mahantji and the priest.

Then another thought arose in Devan's mind: the Mahantji and priest for whose final sight he had stayed behind, were they still alive, or already dead?

Reasoning it out, Devan concluded that when the entire temple had collapsed, how could the Mahant and the priest still be alive? Why was he entangling himself in the matter without cause? It would be better to leave at once. The longer he remained, the longer he would dwell in a place of death. Why should he waste his life in such a place? No, he must leave as quickly as possible. And so, Devan departed.

After walking some distance, a thought arose within him: what is death? Never before had such a question entered his mind. And why would it have? Until now, whatever deaths he had witnessed, he had accepted as death itself. But after seeing the death of Mahantji, doubt arose within him, for what he had always heard from others now seemed uncertain. People often said that one's death comes according to the way one lives and acts. Yet Mahantji and the priest had spent their days in the temple, serving and tending to God, and even so, such an end had come to them.

Devan began to reflect deeply upon the nature of death. Should it be considered the earlier aspect of life, or its later one? Perhaps the earlier, for the moment a new thought is born, the old one dies. In the same way, with the birth of something new, what came before passes away. In this conflict, Devan's mind became deeply entangled.

Then another question arose. Why was it that masters of music had composed songs for specific occasions, yet accepted sohar and samdaun alike for both celebrations of birth and rites of death, though the two are so different? His mind grew clouded and confused. Like a man intoxicated, wandering in a daze yet somehow keeping to the road, Devan too continued onward.

He walked on and on without eating or drinking, until midday. Hunger and thirst did not trouble him. It was as though he had lost all awareness of them. As he went, he came upon a flowering tree. The moment he saw it, a sudden sense of wonder filled him. He stopped

and gazed at it from top to bottom, and without thinking, the words escaped his lips: “Such a flower I have never seen before.”

It was a graceful and well formed tree. Its branches spread in all directions, and its trunk was as smooth as its boughs. Its leaves were broad, long, and green, and its flowers long and red. The tree was covered in blossoms like great scarlet roses. The place was solitary. Seeing the tree, Devan thought that he would remain there for the afternoon. With that thought, he sat down beneath it.

It was midday. A gentle, cool breeze moved softly, yet the sun was fierce, and the heat steadily increased. Travellers, wherever they found shelter, halted to rest through the afternoon. Devan’s hunger and thirst seemed to vanish entirely. Lying flat beneath the tree, he kept gazing at the flowers. His eyes rested upon them, but his mind travelled towards the purpose of his own life.

As his thoughts deepened, he began to reflect that on the path of human life one encounters both gardens in bloom and forests of thorns. Between these, life moves forward. Yet a person fears the thorny forest and longs to remain only in the garden. But since even a flowering tree bears thorns, and even a thorn bush may sometimes bear flowers, how can anyone remain forever in the garden?

By four o’clock, the travellers began once more to take to the road and depart. Seeing them, it came into Devan’s mind that nothing would come of merely lying still. If anything came of life, it came only through moving forward. Had he not come this far today, would he ever have caught sight of such a flowering tree?

He sat up and was still reflecting when he saw a traveller coming from the north towards the south. Seeing him, Devan thought that perhaps this man too was a wanderer like himself, for he wore no upper cloth upon his body, nor did he carry anything upon his head. He had only a small bundle hanging from his hand. Since, however, he was coming from the north, he would surely know that northern road, and it was that very road Devan himself wished to take.

As the traveller came up to the flowering tree, he stopped there. The traveller’s eyes fell upon Devan, and Devan’s upon the traveller. Yet neither spoke. Both were absorbed in themselves. Each was lost in his own current of thought. Then it occurred to Devan that he was the younger of the two, and so it was proper that he should speak first.

He said to the traveller, “Brother, I wish to go northward. Please tell me something of the road.”

The traveller listened carefully to Devan and then replied, “My boy, you look hungry. Your face is dry. First eat something. This bundle of mine is growing heavy. Your stomach will be filled, and my load too will become lighter.”

Hearing this, Devan said nothing. The traveller understood that the poor boy truly was hungry. Why else would he have fallen silent? He rose, came near Devan, and placed the bundle before him.

When Devan opened it, he saw inside such things to eat and drink as he had not only never eaten before, but had never even seen. After eating his fill, Devan spoke again: “Brother, will you please show me the road north?”

The traveller replied, “What will you do by knowing the road ahead?”

Devan said, “There is in my heart a longing to see the world. That is why I left home.”

Smiling, the traveller began to speak. “The world is nothing in itself. It is only a globe made of earth, water, sky, and air. Out of these alone, and again and again out of these, all that you see in the world has come into being. Yet the whole has not remained of one kind; it has split apart. One part is sound, the other rotten. And the strangest thing of all is this: right through the middle of the world runs a line which people call the Equator. That line stretches from east to west. On both sides of it, at equal distances, there is the same sunshine, the same rain, and the same seasons for crops and orchards. The trees and plants too are alike. Yet though everything else is of one kind, humankind is of two kinds. One part is advanced, the other backward. One section has gone far ahead, while the other stands at the very depth of decline.

“You will also see that the people of the world have divided themselves into two directions. On one side, you will find people fair and shining, white as milk. Their bodies, arms, and legs are full and strong, like cattle and buffaloes. They have good food, good drink, and good arrangements for living. But the women there wear such fine, glistening, delicate clothes that, looking at them, you would think they were scarcely dressed at all. The whole body can be seen.

And if your sight grows dim somewhere, then put on spectacles."

"Then, on the other side, you will see poverty gripping people so severely that they have neither a full stomach nor clothes upon their bodies. It is want alone that leaves them naked. They have no certainty of food, no certainty of shelter, and no means of clothing themselves, and so they remain unclad. From four paces away, you can count the bones in their bodies. Their frames are like skeletons, their colour a dry and harsh black, and their hair like withered straw.

"In human society, clothing is regarded as a veil, and by that veil honour and modesty are judged. Now let me ask you one question. Tell me, between those two women, whose honour remains and whose does not?"

At the traveller's words, Devan said hastily, "The one whose body is clothed is the respectable one."

The traveller replied, "Nonsense, boy. You do not understand even this much. Never mind. You are still young, and that is why you do not understand. Look here, people wear clothes only because human beings possess reason and discrimination, and because they feel shame before others. That is why certain parts of the body are considered private. But it is the woman whose body is covered upon whom more eyes are fixed. And the one who has no clothes upon her body, who is like a human skeleton, upon her whose gaze would even fall, that the question of modesty should arise? Now tell me, whose honour remains? The one whose honour remains, she alone is truly honourable."

Hearing the traveller's words, Devan merely nodded in assent.

Encouraged by that nod, the traveller went on, "Now listen to another thing. All the people in the world are human beings. They all have the same limbs: hands, feet, mouth, nose, ears, and the rest. All eat food, all drink water, all wear clothes, and all live in houses to protect themselves from sun and rain, from storm, hail, and cold. When they fall ill, they need medicine. Because of the mind, they study. For pleasure, they sing, and they dance as well. So there ought to be one path for all. The good path has been called the path of religion, and the bad path the path of sin. Then tell me, why are there so many sects, as numerous as frogs in the rains? There may indeed be many roads to one task, but among them the best road can only be

one. If there is one best road, then what need is there for so many others? Why, then, do people quarrel so much, abuse one another so fiercely, and kill one another over them?"

Devan nodded again in agreement.

The traveller, pleased by Devan's nodding and by the expression on his face, felt glad that his words were piercing the boy's heart. Growing even more animated, he said, "My boy, the world is a strange thing. I wish to say much, yet you are from elsewhere and I too am from elsewhere. You are going on your way, and I too am only passing along the road. Even so, understand what little you can in the time that is ours. It will be of use to you in life. And you are still young. You have many years yet to live upon this earth.

"Just as many houses may be built by one method, and many people may gain knowledge from a single book, so too one way of understanding ought to be enough for the needs of life. Then why are these many coloured customs imposed by mahants and the founders of sects? How strange it is. One tells you to worship after eating, another on an empty stomach. One worships with beard and hair grown long, another with beard and hair cut short. One makes a god of clay, another of stone, and another worships without any image at all. One builds a temple, another a mosque, another a church, and worships there. Who knows how many kinds of shrines there are? And then there are those who worship without temple or mosque of any kind. One offers sacred food to God, another worships without any offering at all. One drinks toddy and spirits, eats fish and meat, and then performs worship, while another condemns that as evil. One regards woman as an obstacle on the path to liberation, while another sees the worship of woman itself as the road to salvation. Strange indeed is this world, and strange are the people in it. One considers a prostitute degraded, while another makes a prostitute dance during worship. One beats drum and cymbal and sings hymns and devotions, while another does so without any instrument at all."

Just as children snatch and squabble among themselves over a toy or some article for reading and writing, so it began to happen in Devan's mind. Seeing the expression on his face, the traveller began to think that the poor boy had fallen into an inner conflict. At one

moment his mind turned this way, at another that way. It was becoming unsettled.

For a while, the traveller remained silent, trying to read Devan's feelings. At one moment Devan seemed pleased, at another troubled. At times a smile came to his lips, and at times he looked almost ready to weep. The traveller, for his part, smiled inwardly, though he did not let it show. Then it occurred to him that the subject should now be changed. So he said, "My boy, you can see it yourself, can you not, that in one man's house grain rots while another goes hungry. One man has fields stretching from village to village, while another does not even have enough land to build a house on. In one home clothes lie rotting, while another man remains naked. One builds room upon room, while another lives beneath a tree. One has sack upon sack of salt, while another cannot even have it with his bread. One throws medicine away because it has spoiled, while another dies for want of it. How much more shall I tell you? I had already said that one part of this world is sound and the other rotten."

Devan's face began to grow sad. His mouth fell, and the light in his eyes changed, yet the hunger for understanding awoke in his mind all the more sharply. He thought to himself that if, having come this far, he had already encountered so much, then how much more might lie further ahead. The moment that thought came to him, Devan said to the traveller, "Brother, since I have already come this far, tell me something of the road beyond as well. I shall go and see that too."

Smiling, the traveller began to speak of what lay ahead.

"A mile from here lies Manpur. When you reach it, you will see that some people sit there cross-legged, quietly reckoning the account of life in their minds. They think that whatever they earn by their labour, they will keep their lives within that limit and live accordingly. And that is what they do. But you will also see stampeding men there, men like balloons filled with air, flying higher and higher, some bursting and some falling, and no one can tell what will become of them. So you must observe those seated people carefully. Learn from what you see in them, and shape your life accordingly. What is life? Life is simply this: one should live it as a human being.

"A mile beyond Manpur lies Budhipur. When you reach

Budhipur, you will find that all the people there are gamblers. Day and night they gamble. And the dice they play with are of three kinds. The first kind you will see is that of father and son gambling against one another. As they play, they begin abusing each other. The father says to the son, 'You scoundrel, you are a cheat.' And the son says to the father, 'You rogue, you are the cheat.' You will see father and son trading curses like common ruffians. But do not linger there for long. See it, and then move on. For both of them are cunning rogues. Just as the man who baits a hook with a little fish catches the larger fish in the end, so they too will lure you in with some petty abuse and then entangle you. So look and leave at once.

"The second kind of dice you will see is that of brothers and kinsmen sitting face to face and gambling. As they play, you will see that each begins to cheat the other. Then they start abusing one another, and at last they come to blows. Yet they too are cunning rogues. So, after seeing them, move away at once. If you stay, you will be drawn into deception."

"The third kind of dice you will see is the real game. There you will find the people of two entire families gambling against one another. The true struggle is played upon that board. The players come with every kind of force at their command. Abuse is answered with abuse, violence with violence, stick with stick, and bomb and powder with bomb and powder. When you see that board, you may feel in your heart that you too should play a round. There you may remain. Stay as long as you wish and observe."

Hearing the traveller's words, Devan felt glad at heart. Smiling, he asked, "No one will drive me away from there, will they?"

The traveller replied, "Yes, one side will try to drive you away, but the other will keep you there. Stay with the one who protects you, and regard him as a brother. If he wins, you too will gain. He does not play merely for himself. He plays for you as well, for everyone."

Listening closely, Devan continued nodding and reflecting when the traveller spoke again. "After seeing that place, go on further. A mile beyond it lies Vivekpur. When you leave Budhipur behind, Vivekpur will seem near, and yet, as you go, it will not appear so. But do not turn back without visiting it. Once you reach there, you

will meet Vivek Baba. People also call him Gyaneshwar, Dharmaguru, and the Father of the World. There you will see many horses of many colours, each finer and swifter than the next. None of them are tied. They all remain untethered. I am one of Vivek Baba's attendants. Roaming about, I observe the world."

At the words "Vivek Baba's attendant," Devan interrupted at once and asked, "What brought you here?"

The traveller replied, "I came to see this flowering tree. Yes, let me continue. The moment you arrive there, Vivek Baba will meet you. You will see the horses neighing. Without any cause, they will come near and gather around you."

Devan asked, "Do horses behave wickedly too?"

The traveller replied, "No. Though one thing is true. There are one or two horses who, on seeing a mare, stray a little from the path, but after wandering, they return again."

Evening had fallen, though it was not yet dark. While they were still speaking, the traveller slipped away, but Devan did not notice when or where he had gone. Devan himself was a wanderer, and so no suspicion arose in his mind. One part of him said that he should remain there for the night, while another urged that whatever distance he could cover now would make the journey easier later, for no one can ever complete all that he desires. The next morning, at dawn, Devan set out again.

He was no longer quite the same Devan as before. Not wholly changed, perhaps, but something within him had altered. If his eyes fell upon a temple along the road, he would lower his gaze and walk on. It was early morning, and the sun was still mild. A cool breeze moved gently, making the journey easier and more pleasant.

As he went, Devan came upon a grand temple. It was built of white marble. Freshly painted, it shone with remarkable splendour. Boundary walls stood on all four sides. In front of it stretched more than a hundred bighas of land. Within the enclosure there was a large pond, and beside it an orchard of some ten bighas, planted entirely with Bombay mango trees. There were more than a thousand coconut trees, and fruits of nearly every kind.

On the bank of the pond stood a dharamshala. Masonry steps

led down into the water for bathing. Along the road below ran electric wires. There was only one entrance, secured by a great iron gate. A large brass padlock hung from it. The gate was opened at four in the morning and closed again at eight in the evening. Once shut, no one from outside could enter, and no one inside could leave. Such was the strict command of Mahantji. The people of the region regarded him as stern yet virtuous, and so he was held in great respect.

As soon as he reached the temple, Devan's mind wavered, and he felt that he ought to go inside and look around. He stood for a while on the road, watching people enter and leave. Then Devan too went in.

Once inside, he began observing both the people and the order of the temple with care. Everything seemed very fine to him. The temple shone brightly. The stone courtyard before it had been freshly washed. The fragrance of incense filled the air, making the whole place rich and sweet. Some people were entering to worship, carrying flowers in small baskets and water in brass or copper vessels, while others were returning after offering their prayers. Standing before the temple, Devan bowed in reverence.

The moment he bowed, it occurred to him that just as this was a place of pilgrimage, so too was the human body itself. The two became one in his mind. He felt the place of pilgrimage within his own body. Then he stepped out of the temple and began to wander about.

At the sight of the flowers in the garden, Devan's heart grew glad. Leaving the garden, he went straight to the dharamshala. Standing below it, he carefully observed both the resident ascetics and the travellers who had come from outside. To Devan, the two groups seemed almost like different kinds of people. In them, he perceived two distinct ways of thinking and living. Noticing this difference, he moved closer and looked more closely.

The travellers appeared to him pure in mind and heart, free from deceit, and full of devotion. Then Devan turned his gaze from them to the resident babas of the temple. Their conduct, habits, and even their minds seemed impure to him. Each baba was occupied in shaping himself into some chosen form. One smeared ashes over his body. Another, wearing nothing but a narrow strip of cloth at his

waist, was preparing himself. A third, completely naked, covered himself from head to foot in ash. One dressed himself in a silken dhoti and kurta and applied a simple tilak, while another assumed the appearance of a beggar.

Having thus fashioned their outward forms, one prepared himself by smoking ganja, another by taking opium, one by drinking liquor, and another by consuming bhang. Their eyes began to gleam unnaturally. After arranging their belongings and placing them inside the dharamshala, they went out.

In the dharamshala, only the travellers remained. They too began gathering their bundles and preparing to leave.

Seeing these many coloured disguises, a strong curiosity arose in Devan's mind to understand their ways. But whom could he ask? Reflecting on this, he wondered who might answer his questions. Turning the matter over in his mind, he went towards the kitchen of the dharamshala. The cooks were there, washing pots and utensils. Devan picked up a vessel and began washing it as well. Seeing this unfamiliar face, one of them asked, "Brother, where do you come from?"

At the cook's question, Devan felt relieved, thinking that through this man he might learn the whole truth. He replied, "Brother, I come from a distant village. For a long time I had heard of this holy place, but I never had the means to travel, and so I did not come. This time, I was able to gather the necessary expense, and so I came."

The cook asked, "How long will you stay?"

Devan replied, "As long as I feel inclined to remain."

The cook said, "Very well. Then stay here with us in the storeroom. Do a little work now and then, and eat as you please."

"Very well," Devan answered.

Now Devan had found a way to discover what he wished to know. Pleased at this, he asked, "Brother, those babas who have just gone out, when will they return?"

"When the sun sets."

"Where do they spend the day, and what do they do?"

At this, one of the cooks laughed and said, "One collects

donations in the name of the shrine, another earns offerings by reading people's palms, another begs for alms, and so on. Each does whatever suits him, wherever he finds the opportunity."

"But if all of them are already fed here, why do they need donations, offerings, and alms?"

"Those who beg keep everything for themselves and deposit nothing in the shrine. But those who collect donations with receipts deposit half of it here."

"And what do they do with the rest of the money?"

At this question, all the cooks burst out laughing. One of them said, still laughing, "You have only just arrived. Stay a few days, and then you will see everything for yourself. If we tell you now, you may believe some of it and doubt the rest."

"In which house does Mahantji live?"

Pointing with his finger, the man said, "Do you see that two storeyed building? On the lower floor, the stores and provisions of the shrine are kept, and on the upper floor there are eight rooms. All eight are reserved for him alone."

"No one is allowed to go there, is that so? I too would like to see it."

"No, not everyone is permitted. If you truly wish to see it, then stand nearby after the morning worship and watch from there."

"What happens there?"

"After the worship, everyone goes away to their own place. Only then does the leela begin. But no more should be said. Apart from those rooms, you may wander freely. Now eat your breakfast and go and see the whole place."

"Very well," said Devan, and after eating, he set out to look around.

He went southward. The southern quarter had been arranged like a bazaar. From a distance it appeared small, but once he entered, it seemed very large. The road ran from north to south, with houses standing on both sides like rows of lodgings. There was water and electricity throughout. Cushioned chairs were placed in the verandahs.

There were more than a hundred such lodgings, inhabited by girls and women ranging from youth to middle age. There was no sign of men. From prostitution to the art of song, they were skilled in every trade. Their work extended from preparing incense and offerings for the shrine to conducting their own business. As he walked along the road, Devan moved forward, looking from side to side. At last, he reached the southern end.

Seeing the condition and appearance of those lodgings, it occurred to Devan that he ought to remain there for a few days. Without staying, he would never understand the place properly. Since he had come this far, to leave without observing and understanding it fully would be childish.

Then another thought arose within him: what kind of place had he come to? People move from what is bad towards what is good, yet he had wandered towards what seemed bad. Then again he reflected: bad places exist, bad actions exist, bad thoughts exist, yet they too are forms of knowledge. If he were to learn about them, that would not in itself be evil. And besides, were there not people who did wrong even in good places? If he did not know what evil was, how would he recognise it and guard himself against it?

Thus wavering within himself, Devan stood at the southern end, lifting his eyes and looking about him. On the verandah of a lodging in the eastern row sat a young woman whose innocence had long been lost. As she looked towards Devan, he too found himself looking at her. They exchanged glances, yet whenever their eyes met, the girl lowered hers at once.

A quiet curiosity stirred within Devan. Yet what was he to ask, and with what courage? He stood there for some time. Fear took hold of him, and his mouth grew dry.

Noticing his uneasy expression, the girl asked, "Whom are you looking for?"

"I am not looking for anyone," Devan replied. "I came only to see."

"Come. Sit here."

At the word "sit," Devan moved forward slowly. Again and again, the girl would raise her eyes to look at him, then lower them

once more. Within herself, she felt like one condemned to lifelong exile in a foreign land, where not a single soul belonged to her own people, and there was no hope of return.

Devan came and sat on a chair in the verandah. Seeing his dry face, the girl thought he might be hungry. But his face was dry from fear, not hunger. She asked, "Will you have something to eat?"

"I have just eaten," Devan replied. "I do not wish for anything."

"Why have you come here? This is no place for human beings."

At her words, Devan was startled. Composing himself, he asked, "If this is no place for human beings, then how is it that you live here?"

At this, tears rose in Shanti's eyes. Her words faltered at the edge of speech. Her gaze moved restlessly, like a frightened bird. From head to foot, she looked Devan over. For a long while, her eyes remained fixed on him, while her mind seemed to rise and fall in the currents of life.

Neither spoke. Each seemed to read the other.

After some time, Shanti said, "I shall not answer your question now. I have not yet cooked. Since you have come, I will prepare food first. Later, I shall answer you at leisure. Until then, you may bathe."

Shanti led Devan inside. Within, the space was arranged like a small courtyard, enclosed on all four sides. She closed the outer door. Inside, there were provisions for everything, for bathing and for cooking. There was even space in the courtyard to walk about.

Shanti lit the hearth and began to cook. Devan removed his upper cloth and made ready to bathe. Yet it seemed as though Shanti's mind and Devan's mind had begun calling out to one another. Devan stood by the tank, and Shanti sat beside the hearth, yet both kept looking at each other. Just as, when a man's eyes meet those of a great python, he cannot free himself from their pull, so it came to pass between Devan and Shanti as well.

Devan came down quickly from the tank and sat beside the hearth. His body was bare except for his dhoti. Shanti too had removed the upper garment from her body and wore only sari and

petticoat. Neither Devan nor Shanti had any thought now for the body. Like brother and sister playing unclothed in childhood, the two sat together as brother and sister and began speaking of life.

Shanti said, “Why did you come here?”

Devan replied, “Sister, I left home with a desire to see the world, and so I came here. But why did you ask me that?”

At Devan’s words, Shanti’s heart began to tremble. Her mind grew disturbed. Even her voice began to shake. Letting out a long breath, Shanti said, “Brother, it is well that you have come here. For how else can one understand the world without seeing it? The place you have reached has one kind of life by day and another by night. So whatever you see in the day, at night you will see its very opposite. Since you have come to observe, then see both, the day and the night. But before all that, my life too...”

The moment Shanti spoke in this way, a tide began rising and falling in Devan’s mind. His body began to tremble. Just as a strong gust of wind can thrust aside a man standing firm, so Shanti’s words began to unsettle and shake his mind. However hard he tried, he could not steady himself. Just as a horse yoked to a chariot, once it has gathered its pace, continues for some distance beyond control however much the driver pulls the reins, so it became with Devan’s mind. And yet, in order to master it, he kept his mouth shut and began speaking and listening only with his eyes.

As a strange state had overtaken Shanti’s mind, so too it overtook Devan’s. Both of them went on looking at one another, long and intently. Neither Shanti spoke, nor Devan. It was as though the minds of both had become one and were sinking into the sand of a riverbed.

After a long while, Devan’s mind grew restless. By then, the fire in the hearth had also died down. Just as a calf, when stroked upon the body, closes its eyes and sinks into stillness, so Shanti too had forgotten all outward awareness. As soon as his mind grew unsettled, Devan asked, “Your life?”

“Yes, my life.”

Startled, Devan said, “Tell me.”

Shanti began to speak. “I was born into a well to do farming

family. When I was seven or eight, I went with my mother to see a fair held two miles from our village. A Sahastra Chandi Yajna was being performed there. The yajna lasted nine days, and the fair ran alongside it. For the first three days only the rituals of the yajna were conducted. From the fourth day onwards, the entertainments began. There were grand ras performances, theatre, and dancing. By day there were only the rites of the yajna, devotional singing, and small displays, but the fair at night was overwhelming.

"The arrangements for lighting were such that night seemed no different from day. The rows of shops were decorated in the same way. Beside the place stood a mango grove of some twenty five or thirty bighas, and the fair had been set up there.

"On the fifth day, people from our village went to see the fair, and I too went with my mother. We wandered through the whole fair at one stretch, and my feet began to ache. Then all of us sat down beneath a mango tree. It was decided that we would stay and see the fair at night as well. There was no lack of food and drink, and there were many stalls. At eight o'clock in the evening, the ras and the theatre began. High platforms had been built for both, so that people could see easily from anywhere. The lighting was excellent. Dozens of generators were running. The crowd was immense. Men and women were all mixed together."

"At about ten o'clock, all the generators suddenly went out at once. The moment the lights disappeared, an uproar broke out across the whole fair. In the midst of it, one man lifted me up while another clapped his hand over my mouth and carried me away through the crowd. Whatever I tried to say, no sound would come. And with such a din all around, who would have heard me anyway? The two of them put me into a jeep. Inside it too there was darkness, so I could not see properly. There were three jeeps, one behind the other, and all three set off together.

"The jeep had gone about half a mile from the fair when the lights returned there and the noise faded behind us. The light inside the jeep was switched on as well. When that happened, I saw eight other girls sitting there. My heart seemed to stop. I feared they would kill me and throw me away somewhere. I was certain that I would die that very day. I remembered my village, my family, all my relations,

but what could I do?"

As these words came from Shanti's mouth, tears began to stream from her eyes, and from Devan's as well, and both burst into loud weeping. In Devan's mind arose the memory of his dead parents, and in Shanti's the memory of her living ones. It was as though neither of them retained any sense of bodily shame. Like lifeless bodies, they clung to one another, chest to chest, and wept. Tears flowed from their eyes, sorrow poured from their mouths, and as they held one another, the end of their former lives and the outline of the life ahead began to take shape between them. With their faces close, their hearts seemed to speak all that words could not.

For a long time they remained thus, until the pain stored in their hearts had poured itself out. Just as, in the darkness of night, all things draw close beneath its cover, so Devan and Shanti drew close. And just as, with the rising of the sun, all things separate again into their own forms, so, after their grief had been shared, the two gently moved apart.

Wiping his eyes with both hands, Devan said, "What way is there to leave this place?"

Shanti replied, "Once the lock on the gate is opened, there is a way out. But nothing can be taken along, only oneself."

Devan said, "Then let us leave first. We can speak further afterwards."

At four in the morning, the gate was opened. Half an hour later, people began to come and go. At five o'clock, the two of them set out, keeping some distance between them.

Devan looked about him from time to time, lest anyone should be watching, and Shanti did the same. Yet even if anyone saw them, no one asked anything.

The moment Shanti crossed the gate, she beheld a new world. Everything seemed new to her. The two went straight southward. Neither spoke.

Walking on, they reached Manpur. As soon as they arrived, a sense of peace came over them both. Each was about to speak when they saw the same traveller coming towards them. The moment Devan recognised him, a smile broke across his face. The man came

near and said, “My boy, are you still here? I have already gone to Vivekpur and returned!”

Devan replied, “Brother, Shanti met me on the way, and so time passed in conversation.”

The traveller said, “Very good. Now that the two of you are together, whatever it was you wished to see, you will now see properly. I must go about my work, so I shall not stay. Go on.”

Devan said, “Brother, tell us something in the little time we still have.”

Hearing this, the traveller smiled and said, “My boy, everyone wishes that as many people as possible should listen to what he has to say. But what comes merely of hearing? Every human being has his own life. Not all stand in the same place, that on hearing one thing they will at once fall into step and run. If that were so, all would already be running, but that is not how it is.

“Therefore it is necessary first that one rise oneself and stand upon the path of true humanity. And once one has begun to walk upon that path, then one should try to raise those who have fallen. There are only two ways of lifting people up: some by taking hold of their arm and drawing them forward, others by giving them a push from behind. That alone is life’s true victory: that through one’s actions, many human beings become truly human. Hari (god) is infinite, and infinite are His tales.” ❑

Notes